

“Women of the Bible: Ruth”

*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 (Ruth 1:16).
Ruth 1:1-5, 16-17, 4:13-17 ¹*

A few years ago, a construction worker named Wesley Autrey was waiting for the subway in New York City with his two daughters when a nineteen-year-old student named Cameron Hollopeter suffered a seizure and fell helplessly into the path of an oncoming train. With only seconds to spare, Wesley grabbed Cameron and rolled with him into a drainage ditch between the tracks. The train thundered past only inches above them, and amazingly, neither was hurt.

Now known as “The Hero of Harlem,” Wesley simply says, “I just did it because I saw someone in distress. Someone needed help.” The executive director of the Transit Authority saw it differently: “Wesley Autrey’s rescue was a death-defying act of bravery. He was at the right place at the right time and he did the right thing.”²

“He was at the right place at the right time and he did the right thing.” That’s what Wesley Autrey did. We’re going to look at a story of that sort this morning, too.

In our survey of some of the women of the Bible, we come this morning to one of the two books named for a woman, the short book of Ruth. The book of Ruth is a jewel that sparkles against the dark background of the period of Israel’s Judges. One of the greatest short stories of all time, one author opined that “Ruth is so delicate in its transparent simplicity that the worst service one can do to it is to comment on it.” Well, we’ll do the best we can.

Like Hagar’s story, Ruth’s story is a story with four scenes and a short “back story”: (the back story) all the men in the family die (Ruth 1:1-6); (scene 1) Ruth and Naomi return to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:6-22); (scene 2) Ruth meets Boaz (Ruth 2:1-23); (scene 3) Ruth proposes to Boaz (Ruth 3:1-18); (scene 4) Boaz marries Ruth and they live happily ever after (Ruth 4:1-22).

The Back Story. The book of Ruth is a masterful short story of only eighty-five verses, shorter than many of the psalms and all but a few of the books in the Bible. The story takes place around 1,000 B.C., as Israel’s “dark ages” were ending. This time, known as the period of the Judges, covered nearly 400 years. “*In those days,*” the Bible says, “*Israel had no king, so the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes*” (Judges 21:25).

The book of Ruth tells the story of an inconspicuous migrant family. Unlike most stories, there are no villains here. Not a single character does an evil deed. Yet the unknown author has the skill to make the difference between ordinary and exceptional goodness stand out clearly against the background of common life.

The story begins and ends in the town of Bethlehem, whose name means “House of Bread.” The problem was that there *wasn’t* any bread. Judah was experiencing a severe famine, so a peasant man named Elimelech took his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, to the neighboring country of Moab. There Elimelech tried to make a living for his family, as so many immigrants have done both before and since.

We don’t know how old Mahlon and Kilion were when their family moved, but we know that Elimelech eventually died, leaving Naomi to raise their two sons alone. When Mahlon and

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 24, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

² Verena Dobnik, “NYC Subway Savior Showered with Gifts,” *Associated Press*, January 4, 2007; Jill Gardiner, “Subway Hero Gets the Red-Carpet Treatment,” *The New York Sun*, January 5, 2007.

Kilion reached adulthood, they both married local women, but about ten years later, both brothers died, causing their wives, Ruth and Orpah, to join Naomi in the Fellowship of the Grieving. At some point thereafter, Naomi heard that the famine had ended in Judah, and she decided to return to her homeland once more. This is where the story gets interesting.

Scene 1. We don't know how old Ruth and Orpah were, but women generally married in their teens in that culture, and so they were probably in their twenties. Naomi urged them to remain among their own people, which Orpah decided to do. Sometimes Orpah gets a bad rap at this point, but she wasn't necessarily making a bad choice. The text offers no criticism of her, and for all we know, she was obedient to God's purposes in her life.

Ruth, though, was going with Naomi, no matter what. *"Don't ask me to leave you and turn back"* she said. *"I will go wherever you go and live wherever you live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. I will die where you die and will be buried there. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!"* (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth's words are frequently and appropriately applied to marital commitment, but these words actually expressed a young woman's love for her mother-in-law. What a kind and loving person Naomi must have been to inspire such devotion!

Naomi's return created quite a stir in Bethlehem, as did the arrival of her Moabite daughter-in-law. We're not told much about their situation, but in the absence of life insurance, Social Security, and male breadwinners, Ruth and Naomi must have lived on the edge of poverty.

Naomi was apparently too old to work outside the home, but it was the beginning of the barley harvest, so *one day Ruth said to Naomi, "Let me go out into the fields to gather leftover grain behind anyone who will let me do it." So Ruth went out to gather grain behind the harvesters.* (Ruth 2:2). Ruth made her way to the fields to gather bits of leftover grain the harvesters had missed—the kind of work done by the poorest of the poor.³ This brings us to Scene 2

Scene 2. Although the work was menial, tiring, and degrading, a public acknowledgement of destitution, Ruth gave herself to it with a will. She wasn't ashamed to admit her need, or of working to meet it. Ruth's love for Naomi had cause her to enter poverty on purpose, and now a divine prompting caused her to choose a field belonging to a man named Boaz in which to begin her work.

The Bible tells us that *"as it happened, [Ruth] found herself working in a field that belonged to Boaz"* (2:3). Ruth's choice of Boaz's field was really God's doing, of course, because Boaz was a good and kind man, and he was a near relative to Naomi.

As the morning wore on, Boaz arrived at the field where Ruth was working as he made the rounds of his properties. Bethlehem wasn't a very big place, and everybody knew everybody else, so Boaz saw immediately that there was a stranger working in his field. *"Who is that girl over there?"* he asked his foreman.

"She's the young woman from Moab who came back with Naomi. She asked me this morning if she could gather grain behind the harvesters. She's been hard at work ever since, except for a few minutes' rest over there in the shelter" (2:5-7).

Boaz knew about Ruth, but he had apparently never seen her before. Boaz went over to introduce himself, knowing that, if this was Naomi's daughter-in-law, they were actually kin to one another: *"Listen, my daughter. Stay right here with us when you gather grain; don't go to any*

³ See Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19.

other fields. Stay right behind the women working in my field. I have warned the young men not to bother you. And when you are thirsty, help yourself to the water they have drawn from the well."

Ruth fell at his feet and thanked him warmly. "Why are you being so kind to me?" she asked. "I am only a foreigner." Ruth was indeed a foreigner, and no ordinary one at that. She was a Moabite, a nation descended from Abraham's nephew Lot, and there was about as much love between Israel and Moab as there is today between Israel and the Palestinians, or between the Europeans and the Muslim refugees storming their shores.

As Boaz connected Ruth's reputation with her face, her humility, her faithfulness, and her diligence caused him to cross several social barriers to be kind to her. *"Yes, I know you are a foreigner," he said. "But I also know about the love and kindness you have shown your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers. May the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully" (2:11-12).*⁴

Because of Boaz's instructions to his harvesters, Ruth returned home at the end of the day with much more grain than gleaners usually gathered. When Naomi learned in whose field Ruth had worked, she exclaimed, *"May the LORD bless him! He is showing his kindness to us as well as to your dead husband. That man is one of our closest relatives, one of our family redeemers" (2:20).*

God's provision of "family redeemers"⁵ was one of the first social security systems. In an agricultural economy, land was precious, because a man obviously couldn't grow a crop and provide food for his family without it. Like share-croppers today, men who had no land were condemned to eking out a living, at best.

I say "men who had no land" on purpose. In those days, only men could own land. When Israel conquered Canaan under Joshua, every family received a patrimony of land that passed from generation to generation.

If a man died without male heirs, his brother or his next nearest male relative was supposed to marry the widow and raise up a son who would inherit the other man's land.⁶ This was great in theory, but since there was only expense and no economic advantage to fulfilling the role of family redeemer, it was not a popular practice, and was seldom followed.

Scene 3. The third scene in the story takes place at the threshing floor. Threshing, sometimes called "winnowing," is not familiar to many of us today, but you probably know that it has to do with separating grain from chaff, the hulls removed from the grain.

When we refer to the lip at the bottom of our doors as the "threshold," we're actually using a winnowing term. The threshold is a board set across a winnowing area, particularly in a barn, to keep the grain from being blown across the ground or out of the barn.

In industrialized nations, winnowing is done by machine (combines do it as they harvest), but where such equipment is unavailable, grain and chaff are first separated, or "threshed," by being crushed by hand or by oxen, and then the mixture is thrown into the air where the wind carries the chaff away. Threshing and winnowing are often done at night after the harvesting has been done during the day.

⁴ Notice that "under God's wings" is a feminine metaphor for God.

⁵ Also known as "kinsman-redeemers," or *Go'el*.

⁶ This was called "levirate marriage" (Leviticus 25:25-28; Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

This is what Boaz appears to have been doing as our text begins. He may have been at the threshing floor to take his turn winnowing, not being so wealthy that he could hire it all done, or perhaps he wasn't there to work, but to encourage his workers. In any event, we see in Boaz an earthy and unpretentious man who, though well off, hasn't "gotten too big for his britches," and who enjoys the routines and responsibilities of ordinary life.

This third scene takes place not long after Ruth has begun gleaning in Boaz's fields, which, was, as we have noted, the work of the destitute. Boaz had more than a little interest in Ruth, and she and Naomi both knew it. Ruth was probably still in her twenties, and in that ancient culture she and Naomi both needed the care and protection of a man in order to survive. The question was how to move things along and encourage Boaz's interest.

What Ruth and Naomi did seems pretty strange to us, 3,000 years and half a world away, but the text records their strategy as though it were quite the normal thing to do. Apparently Naomi told Ruth to clean up and to join herself to the crowd at the threshing floor. When things quieted down and those who were standing guard over the grain went to sleep, Ruth was to uncover Boaz's feet and lie down there, awaiting his instructions.

Around midnight, Boaz's feet got cold, and he woke up to find someone lying near him. In those pre-electric days, it was pitch dark, and he couldn't see who it was. Ruth answered his query, "*Who are you?*" with "*I am your servant Ruth. Spread the corner of your covering over me, for you are my family redeemer*" (3:9).

Apparently this was a kind of proposal, letting Boaz know that although he was significantly older than Ruth, she was willing to become his wife. Boaz's response shows that the idea of marrying Ruth had certainly occurred to him, but that he had thought himself too old to win her heart: "*The LORD bless you, my daughter!*" Boaz exclaimed. "*You are showing more family loyalty now than ever by not running after a younger man, whether rich or poor*" (3:10).

Our jaundiced understandings from a permissive age tend to read all kinds of sexual innuendo into the description of this conversation and Ruth's spending the remainder of the night next to Boaz, but such an interpretation would badly miss the mark. Remember that it was very dark. Ruth could not have found her way home without a torch, which would then have alerted the other men to the presence of a woman at the threshing floor, and that would have indeed set the tongues of gossips to wagging to the destruction of both of their reputations.

It's clear from all that we're told both before and after this encounter that Ruth and Boaz were both persons of honorable and noble character.⁷ Further, the Bible is not at all squeamish about describing sexual encounters, whether they reflect favorably on the protagonists or not, and that is just not what is described here.

In fact, perhaps to guarantee proper understanding, the text goes to some length to describe their first sexual experience, after they were married: "*So Boaz married Ruth and took her home to live with him. When he slept with her, the LORD enabled her to become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son*" (4:13). But I anticipate the story.

While his answer to Ruth's proposal was an emphatic "YES!" Boaz told her that there was a problem: "*While it is true that I am one of your family redeemers, there is another man who is more closely related to you than I am. Stay here tonight, and in the morning I will talk to him. If he is willing to redeem you, then let him marry you. But if he is not willing, then as surely as the LORD lives, I will marry you!*" (3:12-13).

⁷ See 3:11. This is the same term used in Proverbs 31:10.

It's hard to believe that Naomi hadn't known about this other man, but she may or may not have told Ruth about him. Apparently Boaz, being of noble character, was Naomi's choice, and she had a pretty good idea about how the other man would respond.

Scene 4. Ruth left the threshing floor at the first glimmer of dawn, and not long after that, Boaz went to the town gate to wait for the other family redeemer to pass by on the way to his fields. In those days, the town gate was the "Hardees" or "McDonalds" where the old men gathered in the mornings, and it also functioned more or less like city hall.

Boaz gathered the other men around to be witnesses as he told this other fellow, "*You know Naomi, who came back from Moab. She is selling the land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. I felt that I should speak to you about it so that you can redeem it if you wish. If you want the land, then buy it here in the presence of these witnesses. But if you don't want it, let me know right away, because I am next in line to redeem it after you*" (4:3-4).

When the man agreed to buy the land, Boaz added, "[Oh, by the way,] *your purchase of the land from Naomi also requires that you marry Ruth, the Moabite widow. That way, she can have children who will carry on her husband's name and keep the land in the family*" (4:5).

"*Then I can't redeem it,*" the other man replied, "*because this might endanger my own estate. You redeem the land; I cannot do it*" (4:6).

It was the law that the first son born to Ruth would be reckoned as belonging to her dead husband, Mahlon, and this son would inherit the family land in order to perpetuate that part of the clan. The family redeemer would have to purchase the land using money from his own family holdings and then give up the land when Ruth's son came of age. The situation was rather similar to the pre-nuptial agreements folks sometimes make these days, and for many of the same reasons.

There is no indication here that the first kinsman did a shameful thing in his refusal, though it might have been so had there not been another family redeemer to fulfill that role. It wasn't that the other man didn't like Ruth, necessarily, but that marrying her would jeopardize the inheritance of his own property. The man's answer was just what Naomi and Boaz had expected, and I can imagine Boaz having a hard time keeping his "poker face" as he closed the deal.

So now "*Boaz married Ruth and took her home to live with him. When he slept with her, the LORD enabled her to become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son*" (4:13). There is extraordinary joy contained in that sentence, because we know that Ruth had already been married to Naomi's son, Mahlon for ten years without bearing any children. And we've seen in some of our previous stories that to be without children in those days was considered to be a shameful condition.

Boaz had no way of knowing that God was going to use him to answer his own prayer of blessing for Ruth, and that's part of what makes this short story so beautiful. But there's more.

This story is recorded in the Bible because Boaz and Ruth became ancestors of the Messiah. The son born to Boaz and Ruth was named Obed. Obed had a son named Jesse, who had a son named David, who became David the King. And so it was that Boaz and Ruth became King David's great-grandparents, and from the line of David came the Messiah himself.

There's even a sense in which Boaz foreshadows the Incarnation itself. Boaz redeemed Ruth, a foreigner who was outside God's covenant, and brought her into the family of Israel. So, too, a thousand years later, *in that same village*, Jesus would come into the world to redeem us Gentiles and to bring us, too, into the family of God. Thanks be to God!