

At God's Direction

Ruth 1:1-19

While we think of the Bible as one book, it's actually a collection of different writings. It contains different styles of writing, different genres of writing, written over 1500 years or so. There are the poetry books, like Psalms. There are the epistles, the letters of Paul and others, where we have to keep in mind that we're reading other peoples' mail. There are the historical books, like Kings and Chronicles. There are the prophetic writings, the words of prophets not written on subway walls, but on scrolls for our instruction.

Then there's Ruth. It somewhat fits in the historical books, but can look at first glance like a romantic comedy or fairy tale. Commentators have referred to it as a short story or novella. It seems like a light story with a happy ending in the midst of books that are full of more death and destruction.

Ruth is unique in several ways. It's one of two books in the Old Testament named after a woman, with the other being Esther. Those two books are also among the few books of the Bible that don't show us God at work directly. That doesn't mean God isn't present. It means that behind the scenes God is at work, orchestrating events that would lead to salvation and liberation and joy. These books show things working at God's direction.

Stories begin before they begin, and so the book of Ruth begins by setting the scene for us. The story takes place in the time when the judges ruled, in a time after the Israelites had been brought by God into the Promised Land but before King David. It could be a libertarian paradise with no centralized authority, but it also meant that "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6), There had been

famine in the land that was supposed to be flowing with milk and honey, and Bethlehem, which means "house of bread," had no bread, so Naomi and her husband left home to look for greener pastures, in one of the neighboring nations that the Israelites were not supposed to associate with.

Then tragedy strikes Elimelech dies before he ever sees any grandchildren, even before he sees his sons married off. And then, the sons die too. We don't know what happened, but maybe they just finally lived up to their names, which meant sick and wasting away. Naomi resolves to return to Israel, to Bethlehem, but wants her Moabite daughters in law to stay. Orpah agrees to stay, but Ruth doesn't. She promises to stay with her mother-in-law, even though it means leaving all that she knows behind.

God isn't obviously present, but God's fingerprints are present throughout the story. Once they make it back to Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth are forced to live off of the kindnesses of strangers. It just so happens that Ruth finds a farmer who still keeps God's commands to not harvest all the way to the edge of the fields, but who lets the poor harvest from the leftovers of his field. The farmer also just happens to be an honorable man who doesn't take advantage of the exotically beautiful Ruth. The farmer also just happens to be a relative of Elimelech, who is fairly well to do. And Ruth catches his eye, not just because of her exotic looks, but also because of how she had taken care of Naomi. Word had gotten around town of how faithful she'd been to Naomi, even when she had no reason to do so. And so Boaz, the farmer, gives special orders to his workers to make sure she

gets all that she needs, and to make sure that they don't harass her.

After Ruth comes home and tells all that happened that day, Naomi sees the opportunity that has presented itself. She sends Ruth to Boaz, and Boaz ends up taking on the role of the kinsman-redeemer, a position described in the book of Leviticus for just such a situation, to redeem the debts and provide for the welfare of the family being redeemed. Ruth and Boaz end up marrying, and they live happily ever after. We're not directly told it, but we're led to assume, led to believe that all of this happened at God's direction.

That's often the way we see God at work in our lives. We don't get a voice booming from heaven or a burning bush. We don't get a giant arrow in the clouds telling us where to go. We just trust that God is with us, and see as we look back how he was guiding us all along.

For years, one of the most popular broadcasts on the radio was the commentary of Paul Harvey. The segment he was most famous for was *The Rest of the Story*. He would begin by recounting a tale of a poor child, or a struggling young adult. Often, only first names would be used, and the audience would be lulled into a sort of complacency. The segment always ended with Paul revealing that the story was actually about some famous person, like W.C. Fields or Doc Holliday or John Wilkes Booth. He would then give his famous tagline; "Now you know the rest of the story."

The story of Ruth is full of those connections. It is a story full of twists and turns, of struggle and joy. At first glance, it seems like a simple story of boy meets girl, of a happily ever after that starts with us wondering how they could ever be happy. When we look deeper, though,

when we know the rest of the story, we see things happening at God's direction. We see God at work in ways we never expected.

The book of Ruth concludes with a brief genealogy, that her son was named Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. And in the Old Testament, that's where it ends. But in the beginning of the New Testament, the beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew, that genealogy continues until "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16). Through Boaz and through his son, God provided a kinsman-redeemer for Naomi and Ruth. But through them, in that great list of how God had worked in the lives of ordinary people from Abraham to Joseph and Mary, God provided a redeemer for us all. A redeemer who does more than provide for the earthly needs of widows. A redeemer who has redeemed us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Not by agreeing to take responsibility for us, not with silver or gold, but with His holy, precious blood, and his innocent suffering and death.

And that's the rest of the story. Because of that redemption, because of what Jesus, the Son of David, has done for us, we are not bitter, but full of delight. The delight that we, who once had nothing and no one to depend on, now have been saved and given more than we could imagine, more than we could ever deserve or earn on our own. And like Naomi, we can look back on our lives, and see things that happened at God's direction. We see that God has been with us all along.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, IA
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