

A FASCINATING STORY

Ruth 2:1-23

Ruth, the heroine of this fascinating book, was one of the most charming women of the Old Testament. In the story of her life we have a beautiful portrayal of true faith, genuine love, and unswerving loyalty.

I. The Circumstances.

Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, were citizens of Bethlehem-judah, a village located five miles south of Jerusalem. To escape a terrible famine on their own land, they and their sons, Mahlon and Chilion, migrated to the land of Moab, a pagan country on the opposite side of the Dead Sea.

This migration was very unwise, for God had led His people to possess that land, wherein they might enjoy His protection and blessings. It was not God's will for His people to leave their land in order that they might dwell in the midst of a heathen nation, whose inhabitants had been very unkind to them on previous occasions. So, when Elimelech took his family into such a land, he took them on a journey which was very displeasing to God. Instead of leaving, they should have remained in Bethlehem-judah for God had placed them there, and He was quite able to sustain them throughout the time of famine. In fact, it is never wise to leave any position in which God has placed us merely because difficulties arise.

While sojourning in Moab they were away from the altars of God and the fellowship of God's people, which was very unfortunate. Although they had gone there for the duration of the famine only, they continued to reside there for years. So, if Elimelech would not submit himself to the dealings of God in Bethlehem-judah, it was necessary that he feel God's hand upon him in Moab, because it was an absolute certainty that he could not run away from God. After leading his family in paths of disobedience to God, Elimelech died.

As might have been expected, in the natural course of events the sons married Moabite women, Mahlon marrying Ruth and Chilion marrying Orpah, which was something that God had forbidden. Quite naturally, God punished them then for their disobedience to His command and within ten years after their marriage both Mahlon and Chilion passed away. Thus, the three widows were left in seemingly destitute circumstances.

II. The Choices.

As a backslider, Naomi had been away from God and His people for ten years. Meanwhile, she had suffered under the chastening rod of God, having lost her husband and their two sons. She decided that it was time for her to go home. This is another case where the death of a loved one or of loved ones marked the turning point in a life. Heartbroken and lonely, and craving the fellowship of her own people in the hour of trial, Naomi concluded that she ought to spend her last days among her friends of former years.

When the good news that there was an abundance of food in Judah reached her, she announced to her daughters-in-law that she was going home. Her devoted daughters-in-law started on the journey with her. When they arrived at the border between Moab she besought them in Moab. As she explained the situation to them, she made it clear to them that their prospects for the future were anything but bright in the event they remained with her. Seemingly, there were no advantages in their going on with

her. To say the least, in Bethlehem-judah they would have only a very slight chance to marry again and to have happy homes. Three times she urged them to return to their homes, not that she did not care for their company, but because she was exceedingly anxious about their future welfare.

Naomi told her daughters-in-law that they had dealt kindly with her deceased sons and with her, for which she was truly grateful. She did her best to allay the bitterness of parting by praying that God would grant them rest in the houses of their future husbands. Then she bestowed on them the kiss of affection prior to their separation.

In the case of Orpah, Naomi's arguments were effective. Self still ruled her heart, so reluctantly she yielded to the entreaties of her mother-in-law, she kissed her, she bade her farewell, she departed for her mother's house, the gods of Moab and the old life from which she had emerged, and she disappeared from the pages of history.

In spite of Naomi's sad and destitute condition, as well as her earnest and steadfast entreaties, and fully aware of what was involved in her choice, Ruth refused to return but clave unto her with purpose of heart. It was not only her love for Naomi that caused Ruth to remain with her, but her love for God was also a contributing factor. Ruth had come to know God and He meant so much to her that she was not willing to return to her home where heathen worship was practiced. Ruth's choice was not the result of mere impulse, but of a deep conviction.

With words full of pathos, beauty, and wholehearted devotion, Ruth clearly, definitely, and finally announced her choice. She declared, "Whither thou goest, I will go"--your society shall be mine; "Where thou lodgest, I will lodge"--your home shall be mine; "Thy people shall be my people"--your family shall be mine; "Thy God shall be my God"--your God shall be mine; "Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried"--your end shall be mine. Her language was that of renunciation, for she was deliberately turning her back on her country, her people, and her former gods. It was also the language of self-surrender, for she was binding herself to Naomi, to her way of life, to her people, and to her God.

III. The Consequences.

In due time Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem. For the former it must have been a very humiliating experience. She had left in a spirit of proud independence, but she returned very poor and bereft of both her husband and her sons. Although bitterness had been her lot, she had learned that God had never forgotten to be gracious unto her.

Upon her arrival in her new home, Ruth became anxious to do something to earn a living. She knew the therapeutic value of hard work. She also knew that she would not reap much grain or receive much reward for a hard day's work beneath the hot sun. But she considered even that to be better than pining alone in solitude, expecting others to minister to her. She had lost her husband, but she had not lost heart. She wanted to go into the barley fields nearby and glean, as the Law permitted the poor to do.

Ruth voluntarily assumed the position of the widow, the orphan, and the very poor, and went to glean in the field of Boaz, a wealthy member of the family of Elimelech, her father-in-law. Coming from Bethlehem and observing her among the gleaners as they moved through his field, Boaz became interested in her. He went to his servants and

asked, "Whose damsel is this?" When they informed him, Boaz approached Ruth, gave her a warmhearted welcome, and invited her to glean exclusively in his fields throughout the harvest, which was a suggestion that his fields were the most favorable place to glean to the best advantage. Boaz urged Ruth to follow the maidens who were binding the sheaves just behind the men who were reaping. Already he had told the young men not to become interested in her, and not to touch her, and not to prevent her from gleaning. He instructed Ruth to go to the vessels and drink of the water which the young men had drawn when she was thirsty, so that she would not have to go to the well for herself, and that was a very unusual concession to a gleaner. Boaz not only protected her from insult, but he tenderly cared for her physical comfort also. Then Ruth "fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said unto him, Why have I found grace in thine eyes?" In effect Ruth said: "I am a stranger in your land. Why should I be treated in such a manner?"

The reply of Boaz revealed that God had been working with him. His answer suggested that although she was indeed a stranger, she had shown herself worthy of honor and blessing by her attitude and actions toward her mother-in-law, by abandoning her former home in Moab, and by casting her lot with the people of Israel. This reflected the good character of both Boaz and Ruth. To appreciate unselfishness, a person must be unselfish himself. Boaz did not leave to God alone the task of rewarding Ruth. He implemented it. As she sat beside the reapers at the noonday meal, Boaz showed an increasing interest in Ruth by inviting her to dip bread into a type of sour relish which was considered to be quite refreshing after the heat of the fields, and to partake of the grain taken from the field and roasted in a pan. He gave orders to his gleaners to drop some of the grain on purpose in order that Ruth might have more to glean. Boaz did not want to humiliate Ruth with unearned charity, so he commanded his young men to be generous in leaving some grain behind for her. He told them not to say anything to embarrass her. He neither pampered nor embarrassed Ruth. The rewards of her industry and of the generosity of Boaz are seen in the ephah of barley, which was about two-thirds of a bushel.

When Ruth informed Naomi what had occurred, Naomi advised her as to what she should do. She handled the situation with rare human insight, delightful discretion, tender love, and full understanding.

The store of what took place presents an ancient Hebrew custom, familiar to the Jews, but very strange to us. The Hebrew law required that, if a man died without an heir, his nearest of kin was to take the place known as kinsman redeemer, become the husband of the widow, and rear a family. Meanwhile and accordingly Boaz became the redeemer of Ruth. She in turn became his wife. As his wife she gave birth to a son, whom they named Obed. Due to her great fidelity and deep devotion, she was rewarded with a favored position, a happy life, and a glorious lineage--for she was an ancestress of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.