

Study 13: A Light to the Gentiles

“Taken as a whole, the story of Ruth is one of those signs. It was written to give us encouragement and hope that all the perplexing turns in our lives are going somewhere good. They do not lead off a cliff. In all the setbacks of our lives as believers, God is plotting for our joy” – John Piper

Introduction. In the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, we are blessed with many wonderful stories, descriptions of human events that offer us unique insights into the relationship between God and His people. But I can think of no story more poignant, more dramatic, or more enjoyable than the story found in the *Book of Ruth*, a little gem of the Old Testament. It's a timeless story, really a multi-level love story touching the lives of three people and their relationship with each other and with their God.

Like the *Book of Jonah*, the *Book of Ruth* often leads to the question: Is the story of Ruth a true story? If you're looking for my personal opinion, I would answer, "Yes." But whether it's entirely true or a highly edited and modified version of an ancient, traditional story dating back to the time of the Judges really makes little difference. True or not, the *Book of Ruth* is still inspired. In other words, it was given to us by the Holy Spirit, and the Church has always included Ruth in the Old Testament canon. It therefore merits our attention and our study so we will come to understand what the Spirit reveals to us.

The *Book of Ruth*, as a splendid testimony to God's providence and direction, has an abiding religious value. Ruth, of course, realizes her greatest nobility by her inclusion in the genealogy of Jesus Christ [Mt 1:5], but the book's artistic qualities have made it a favorite among many. The great German poet, Goethe, once referred to it as *“the loveliest little volume that has been ethically and idyllically handed down to us.”* Handed down to us? Yes, Herr Goethe, but more importantly, *revealed* to us for our salvation.

Reading. Open your Bible now and read the Book of Ruth. Since the story takes place during the era of the Judges, realize that the times were truly chaotic. In Ruth we encounter only a small slice of this chaos. God's chosen ones have shown themselves to be a rebellious, stiff-necked people who responded to God's call defiantly. That they have been able to settle in the Promised Land can be attributed solely to God's grace and merciful love. Hidden in the story, though, is the foreshadowing of a ruler who will consolidate all of Israel's political power and establish an empire. Although the worldly rule of King David, Ruth's descendant, is ephemeral, in Ruth God points the way to the Incarnation and His eternal Kingdom.

Timing and Authorship. The story is a family story like many others in the Bible, but for unknown reasons it was given to us as a separate piece, not integrated into another book as were many other Biblical stories. The story is set during the period described in the Book of Judges and, therefore, is traditionally placed in the Bible immediately after that book. Was it written at that time? As you might imagine the authorship and dating of the book are controversial.

Some scholars argue that the Book of Ruth was likely written or, at least, edited during the period following Ezra's reforms, i.e., many centuries after the era of the Judges. They believe the story of Ruth, like that of Jonah, provided a needed balance to the tendency of some to advance Ezra's directives beyond reasonable bounds. After the return from exile, the danger of absorption and gradual disappearance through intermarriage with the neighboring peoples was very real as the nation struggled to

survive. Viewed in isolation, the prohibition against intermarriage decreed by Ezra could easily lead to a narrow and exclusive emphasis on racial purity as the basis of God's favor. John the Baptist was not the first to protest against such legalism when he said:

"And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones" [Mt 3:9].

This reading of Ruth, then, emphasizes that a legitimate fear of the dangers of intermarriage with pagans in general doesn't mean that in a particular case such a marriage cannot actually help realize God's plan.

There are also scholars who claim the story of Ruth is completely fictional, without any historical basis, and was written simply to glorify the fidelity of a woman. Such a view, however, ignores numerous internal clues, all pointing to the story's historical roots. For some the story is simply a poetic reworking of an earlier historical tradition dating to the time of the Judges. Some names, for example, the names of the sons — Mahlon (sickness), Chilion (consumption), and Orpha (turning the back) — seem less real and were perhaps poetically inspired with symbolic value.

Other scholars, however, believe that Ruth was actually composed during the time of the Judges and in this they agree with rabbinic tradition. That same tradition also claims Samuel as the author. Since the book was written in large part to extol Ruth as an ancestor of David, it's quite possible that its date of composition was in the Davidic or immediate post-Davidic period. This view also stresses that the author of Ruth chose to point out that the great King David was a direct descendent of a "mixed" marriage. Perhaps he selected Ruth to emphasize why David displayed such friendship with the Moabites [1 Sam 22:3 ff.].

So, whom are we to believe? As you can see, authorship and dating are disputed. Personally, I believe the time of composition cannot be far removed from the time of the Judges. As for the author, all we can say for certain is that we know virtually nothing about him, and so we simply thank him for writing this wonderful little book.

The Book of Ruth. Like any good story, the story of Ruth captures our attention from beginning to end. It also leads us to examine human life and the world through a lens that focuses on God, and does so in a way that transcends time, religious belief, and cultural norms. The story, which is presented to us in several acts, is preceded by a brief introduction and followed by a Davidic genealogy highlighting Ruth as King David's great-grandmother.

Introduction: The Days of the Judges [Ru 1:1-5]. Here the author sets the stage for the reader by describing the time, place, and situation, as well as the story's main characters. We learn that the events described take place sometime during the period of the conquest of Canaan (c. 12th Century B.C.) as told in the Books of Joshua and Judges. As we know from our earlier studies, these were troublesome times. The Land of Canaan was torn by war and strife, with famine a frequent consequence of war. Fields were often burned by marauding armies or left unsown while the men went off to war. It's particularly interesting to note how careful the author was to ensure his historical facts were presented accurately.

In these few verses we are told that famine drove Elimelech and his family to leave Judah and settle in Moab, located in the high-country east of the Jordan River. This family, on which the story centers, includes: Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, both from Bethlehem in Judah; their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion; and the sons' two Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. We're then told rather bluntly that the family was plagued by a series of tragedies. First Elimelech died and then, after ten years, both sons also died. Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law were now widows. As a widow, Naomi's situation was difficult enough, but for a family of three widows without husbands to act as their protectors, their lives would be almost unbearable. Given the times in which they lived, their very survival was questionable. After all, Naomi was an expatriate, a foreigner, living with the widows of two foreigners. Without position in the social order of the times, she would be forced to rely on the help of relatives, something she probably could not count on, especially if she remained in Moab. Understanding the situation of these three women, we now move on to the first act of the story.

Act One: The Return [Ru 1:6-22]. With Judah no longer suffering from famine, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem in Judah, but encouraged her daughters-in-law to remain in their own country where their chances of survival would be far greater. We are overwhelmed with pity for Naomi as she described her plight, but at the same time admire her willingness to sacrifice her only link with these surviving members of her family, all for their benefit. Orpah followed Naomi's advice and left her mother-in-law to return to her own people. And although there was a high probability that Naomi would be rendered destitute, Ruth pledged to cling to her mother-in-law in a magnificent gesture of loyalty:

But Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you" [Ruth 1:16-17].

The beauty of Ruth's declaration of fidelity is probably unsurpassed in all of literature. It literally defies comment.

Interestingly, I have sometimes heard Ruth's proclamation of loyalty included as a reading at weddings. Even though it certainly wasn't intended to describe the relationship of husband and wife, I suppose the words have some relevance to marriage. I've always thought of it as an expression of deep familial friendship and the loyalty that grows out of such a relationship. Today we seem to live in a world in which separation, both physical and communal, have lessened the strength of family bonds. As a society I believe we suffer greatly because of this.

Naomi's subsequent remarks relating to her name stress the importance which the Hebrews attached to names. Naming their children at birth they hoped the names would influence their character, making them worthy of the names they bore. Naomi, though, when greeted by the people of Bethlehem, addressed the evil that had befallen her and said to them:

"Do not call me Naomi ['Sweet']. Call me Mara ['Bitter'], for the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me

back empty. Why should you call me ‘Sweet,’ since the LORD has brought me to trial, and the Almighty has pronounced evil sentence on me” [Ru 1:20-21].

Because of her desperate situation, Naomi would rather be named after bitterness [See Ex 15:23] and looked to God, questioning why she had suffered so. But by doing so, like the Psalmist, she knew God had heard her prayer and would answer her in His time:

Trust in the Lord and do good that you may dwell in the land and live secure [Ps 37:3].

Although Naomi referred to evil as coming from God, she did not mean moral evil or sin, which comes from man himself. She was, instead, referring to such natural evils as death and famine that so affected her life. The first act ends with an introduction to the second act, centered on the barley harvest.

Act Two: The Barley Field [Ru 2:1-23]. Here the author reveals the identity of Boaz, a powerful and wealthy man related to Naomi’s late husband Elimelech. The action all takes place in his barley field where Ruth hopes to glean by following the harvesters hired by Boaz. Such gleaning was a long-standing custom that let the poor, particularly widows, orphans, and aliens, follow the harvesters and gather what was left behind. In Leviticus it is presented to the Israelites as a command by God:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. Likewise, you shall not pick your vineyard bare, nor gather up the grapes that have fallen. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. I, the Lord, am your God [Lv 19:9-10].

At this point Ruth does not know who Boaz is, but in her diligence and simplicity she has caught the attention of her husband’s wealthy kinsman. This becomes apparent by several questions asked by Boaz [Ru 2:5; 3:9; 3:16]. He asks his first question of his overseer and is told of her foreign and local connections:

“Whose young woman is this?” [and is told] “She is the young Moabite who came back with Naomi from the plateau of Moab” [Ru 2:5-6].

Impressed by Ruth’s willingness to work hard, Boaz approaches and tells her to stay in his fields, follow his harvesters, and take advantage of the water he provides for his people. The kindness of Boaz shines forth and we note his increased interest in the young Moabite woman. But Ruth, overwhelmed by his generosity, falls prostrate before Boaz:

“Why should I, a foreigner, be favored with your attention?” [Ru 2:10]

Boaz responds by relating what he has already heard about her, specifically her remarkable loyalty to Naomi. Yes, she is a non-Israelite, but she is also a pious woman of deep loyalty and obvious courage. He extends God’s blessing to her and invites her to join him and the harvesters as they sit down to eat their meal. Then, instructing the harvesters, he ensures she will be able to glean without opposition. By the end of the day, Ruth was able to glean an ephah, approximately a bushel, of barley, which she takes to Naomi, along with the leftovers from her meal.

It is then that Naomi reveals Boaz' family connection, telling Ruth:

"This man is a near relative of ours, one of our redeemers" [Ru 2:20].

Family solidarity had its origins in early clan relationships and the members of the clan were conscious of the blood ties uniting them. Here Naomi referred to the *go'el*, a word with roots meaning "to buy back" or to "redeem." The *go'el* was a near relative who had a right and duty to protect family interests, which involved looking out for the welfare of poor relations and even redeeming persons or patrimony. In a sense he acted in place of God since the Jews regard the Lord as the *go'el* of all Israelites. The role of the *go'el* will become more apparent in Act Four of our story.

Naomi wisely instructed Ruth to continue her gleaning in Boaz' fields since he has obviously taken an interest in her well-being. Ruth does so throughout the barley and wheat harvests.

Act Three: The Threshing Floor [Ru 3:1-18]. At this point in our story, we encounter the custom of levirate marriage, something Naomi alluded to earlier [Ru 1:11-12], but not specifically addressed until now. This form of marriage, like the duties of the *go'el*, was designed to ensure that death did not undermine the continuation and strengthening of family bonds, including the maintenance of property. It is addressed in in the *Torah*:

When brothers live together and one of them dies without a son, the widow of the deceased shall not marry anyone outside the family; but her husband's brother shall come to her, marrying her and performing the duty of a brother-in-law. The firstborn son she bears shall continue the name of the deceased brother, that his name may not be blotted out from Israel [Dt 25:5-6].

The chapter opens with Naomi instructing Ruth to join Boaz on the threshing floor that evening where he will be winnowing barley. It's obvious that Naomi has decided that Boaz has been sent as their *go'el* and she wants to ensure Ruth convinces him to enter into a levirate marriage.

Boaz, after eating and drinking, lies down on the floor to sleep, but awakens in the night to find a woman at his feet. When he asks who she is, Ruth responds:

"I am your servant Ruth. Spread the wing of your cloak over your servant, for you are a redeemer" [Ru 3:9].

Ruth's bold action was the customary procedure for a woman to propose marriage, for that's exactly what she is asking of Boaz. Strictly speaking, Ruth, as an alien, had no right to benefit from these customs of Israel. But Boaz considered Ruth worthy and once again extended God's blessing to her. He then accepted her proposal, with a qualification:

"I will do for you whatever you say; all my townspeople know you to be a worthy woman. Now, I am in fact a redeemer [i.e., a go'el], but there is another redeemer closer than I."

[By this Boaz means there is a closer male relative who must be applied to first, since he had rights to buy the field we later discover Naomi owns.]

“Stay where you are for tonight, and tomorrow, if he will act as redeemer for you, good. But if he will not, as the Lord lives, I will do it myself. Lie there until morning” [Ru 3:11-13].

The author, by calling Ruth “a worthy woman,” demonstrates a compatibility with Boaz who is described in the original Hebrew as “strong and worthy.”

The next morning Boaz gave her six measures of barley telling her:

“Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty” [Ru 3:17]

These words, of course, refer to more than the barley he has given her. Ruth will also return to Naomi overflowing with the good news that Boaz will likely be their redeemer. When Ruth returned to Naomi and revealed all that had happened, Naomi realized Boaz would act promptly:

“Wait here, my daughter, until you learn what happens, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today” [Ru 3:18].

Act Three, then, ends with this prophetic proclamation by Naomi. But even now, although sharing Naomi’s confidence that Boaz can be trusted to act, we are left in suspense because of the unknown closer relative. Was Naomi aware of this other near relation? It seems hard to believe she wasn’t. Perhaps she didn’t consider him as worthy as Boaz and hoped God would provide the result she had planned for.

Act Four: Boaz as Redeemer [Ru 4:1-17a]. The final act begins with Boaz calling a formal meeting with his kinsman in the presence of ten elders and conducted at the city gate. This was the usual practice for handling such an important matter. The elders served as judges to “seal” any agreement or to decide on a proper result should agreement between the two parties prove elusive [See Dt 25:7-9].

Boaz spells out the details, including the purchase of the field Naomi wishes to sell and the acceptance of responsibility for her daughter-in-law, “Ruth the Moabite.” But his kinsman rejects the offer, telling Boaz to “do it in my place, for I cannot” [Ru 4:6]. He then removed his sandal as required by the Deuteronomic code [Dt 25:7-10], telling Boaz, “Acquire it for yourself” [Ru 4:8].

Accepting this, Boaz declares publicly that he has acquired the holdings of Elimelech and his sons, will take Ruth as his wife, and “raise up a family for her late husband...” [Ru 4:10]. He accepts and is willing to jeopardize his own inheritance by taking Ruth into a levirate-type marriage. The elders and townspeople all state their public agreement by referring back to the women of the patriarchs:

“All those at the gate, including the elders, said, “We do. May the Lord make this woman come into your house like Rachel and Leah, who between them built up the house of Israel. Prosper in Ephrathah! Bestow a name in Bethlehem! With the offspring the Lord will give you from this young woman, may your house become like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah” [Ru 4:11-12].

Here the people turn to Rachel who died giving birth to Benjamin – according to tradition on the way to Bethlehem. Tradition also connects Ephrathah with Bethlehem, thus

bringing things full circle. And in Micah's messianic prophecy, Bethlehem and Ephrathah are joined:

But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, least among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times...He shall take his place as shepherd by the strength of the Lord, by the majestic name of the Lord, his God; and they shall dwell securely, for now his greatness shall reach the end of the earth: he shall be peace [Mic 5:1,3-4].

The locals also referred to Tamar, another non-Israelite woman, who, like Ruth, perpetuated the line that leads to King David. Of course, as you likely recall, Tamar's methods were more than questionable [See Gn 38]. The fact that Ruth is a Moabite and yet fits humbly and easily into her adopted country displays an atmosphere of remarkable acceptance by her new neighbors. And later, when Ruth bears a son, the women of the town rejoice, blessing the child, "*May he become famous in Israel!*" [Ru 4:14]. We are then told that the women go on to exclaim:

"A son has been born to Naomi!" [meaning her grandson] They named him Obed [Ru 4:17a]

In the end barrenness becomes fruitful, poverty and destitution are replaced by security, familial loyalty is rewarded with future peace and happiness, and God's providence works through the lives of those who are faithful to Him and His Law – truly the sort of happy ending we all enjoy.

But there's still more, for Obed "*was the father of Jesse, the father of David*" [Ru 4:17b]. The book then concludes with a genealogy stretching back to Perez, the father of Hezron, and continuing to the birth of King David [Ru 4:18-22]. The genealogy provides proof that the book, or at least this part of it, was written sometime after the time of King David.

Faith and Blessings. As I said earlier, the story of Ruth is a multi-level love story, not perhaps the kind of love story we're familiar with today. But still, the love we encounter in this story – the love between Naomi and Ruth, and the love between Ruth and Boaz – is true love, for love is ultimately a decision, not an emotion. How did the women praise Naomi and Ruth after Obed was born?

He will restore your life and be the support of your old age, for his mother is the daughter-in-law who loves you. She is worth more to you than seven sons" [Ru 4:15].

The book is also grounded in a deep religious faith, one that turns to God in trust and confidence. The attitudes and choices of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz reflect their certainty that God is present and active in the events of their ordinary lives, and that ultimately trust and surrender to His providence will bring rewards [Ru 2:12]. This is highlighted perhaps most emphatically by the many blessings bestowed throughout the story. These blessings reveal the extent to which God is experienced as being intimately involved in the unfolding of the human drama.

In the first blessing, Naomi twice calls on God to grant favors to the young widows as she encourages them to go back to their own country:

“May the Lord show you the same kindness as you have shown to the deceased and to me. May the Lord guide each of you to find a husband and a home in which you will be at rest” [Ru 1:8-9]

Note that Naomi has no problem extending God’s blessing to the two Moabite women because she knows they are both worthy and pious. She also leaves the details up to God and His providential will. Although we know nothing of Orpah’s future, the blessing itself is certainly fulfilled in Ruth as events progress.

The second blessing is extended by Boaz as he recognizes Ruth’s loyalty and all she has done for Naomi. He, too, has no trouble extending the blessing of the God of Israel on a foreigner because of her evident goodness:

“May the Lord reward what you have done! May you receive a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge” [Ru 2:12].

Naomi and Boaz have both accepted that Ruth was sincere when she proclaimed:

“Your people shall be my people and your God my God” [Ru 1:16].

The third blessing occurs when Ruth returns from the barley field, and highlights Naomi’s sense of divine providence that God has led Boaz to be their redeemer:

May he be blessed by the Lord, who never fails to show kindness to the living and the dead” [Ru 2:20].

Here Naomi anticipates the role that Boaz will play in their futures, showing that despite her difficult situation, she has never lost faith.

The fourth blessing is extended by Boaz in the dramatic conclusion of the events on the threshing room floor. Boaz begins his reply to Ruth’s request by turning first to God, asking that He bless her:

“May the Lord bless you, my daughter! You have been even more loyal now than before in not going after the young men, whether poor or rich” [Ru 3:10].

In other words, her current actions show that Ruth, by choosing to marry Boaz, obviously an older man, is seeking to do the right thing by providing a legal descendent for her late husband and for Elimelech rather than following her natural inclinations. Indeed, the theme of this fourth blessing is echoed in the final two blessings.

Once the agreement between Boaz and his unnamed kinsman is made, the elders bless Ruth with the words we have already included above [Ru 4:11-12] in which she is compared to Rachel and Leah as one who will bring prosperity to Bethlehem and to the house of Boaz. Finally, the women bless Naomi, again with the words we included above [Ru 4:14-15].

Through these many blessings we encounter the presence of God Who is seen as entering into the lives of the people through the unfolding of events. God’s name is also solemnly invoked by both Ruth [Ru 1:17] and Boaz [Ru 3:13] as they pledge to be faithful to their word. We see God’s intervention taking place in subtle ways and not through spectacular theophanies. There are no earthquakes, no battles, no visions, just

God's presence experienced in a variety of ways, through blessings, oaths, and greetings that demonstrate how close He is to us in our daily struggles.

Perhaps the most pertinent message from the Book of Ruth lies in the quiet conviction that no matter how painful and uncertain the present may be, God's providence is at work. It is in the daily routine of our lives that God's will for us is so often worked out. Most noticeable is the common attitude of spontaneously turning to God to bless and thank Him for events that disclose His providence. It is an attitude expressed by all those encountered in the story, not just by the primary characters. How good it would be if today we would all try to do the same! And how much our broken world needs God's blessings and our thanks.

Unity of the Two Testaments. We encounter Ruth and Boaz, as ancestors of the world's Redeemer, Jesus Christ, in the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke. Aside from these direct references, though, the entire *Book of Ruth* is really an interesting parallel of the Gospel events. For just as the chosen people failed in their mission of being the instrument of salvation for all the nations and separated themselves from the work of Redemption carried out by Jesus Christ, so also Naomi's next of kin was unwilling to be her champion or redeemer and another, Boaz, had to perform the function of bringing the gentile, Ruth, into the family of God.

The *Book of Ruth* is well represented in the Liturgy. Indeed, the familiar greeting, "The Lord be with you," is the greeting of Boaz to his farm hands [Ruth 2:4]. This was a common form of greeting in Biblical times, but under the light of the Gospel message, it takes on a new and profound meaning. Recall Jesus' promise to the Apostles after He commissions them at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "And behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world." By saying to another, "*The Lord be with you,*" we are extending Jesus' promise to them as a form of blessing.

Questions. Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. What image of marriage, widowhood, and family life is conveyed in the pages of the Book of Ruth?
2. Would you call the story of Ruth a "romance" in our modern sense of a tale of romantic love?
3. What messages do you find most appropriate for today's Christians (and for others)?