

Devotional Meditations on
the Book of Ruth

Benji Swinburnson

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Note: This is a Draft Copy in Need of Editing

#1 – Devotional Meditations on the Book of Ruth 1:1-5

The book of Judges ended on a low note for the nation of Israel. The age of Joshua largely continued the model of Moses. As Moses was a faithful servant in God's house, so also was Joshua. As the Lord was with Moses, so he was with the son of Nun. As the narrative progressed, Israel was increasingly enveloped in a downward spiral of sin and depravity. Judges were raised up to bring a temporary rescue, but these leaders looked less and less like their predecessors. Every time we make a copy of a document its quality gradually degrades. So also with the twelve judges. In the end, God's Spirit of power is still present in the judge, but the vessel is increasingly unlike Moses the man of God. Samson delivered Israel, but he was no Joshua. The old order of things is slowly fading and passing away.

But the hope for new and better things remains. God's promise stands secure. In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did what was right in his own eyes. But a king is coming. God's kingdom is still advancing. His grace will triumph over human sin.

The book of Ruth is a key part of the story of this coming king. The genealogy at the end of the book reveals this quite clearly, linking us to David the Son of Jesse. Through him, life, abundance, and victory will come to God's people. But we are not quite to the era of the kings.

The book of Ruth begins in the aftermath of the era of the Judges (1:1). God had promised life and abundance to his people if they held fast to him in faith, loyalty, and love. He had also threatened famine and death if they turned away from him and served other gods.

The opening scene of Ruth presents a personal picture of the ugly effects of sin and unfaithfulness. Here we behold a family of Israel in Bethlehem of Judah. There is a hidden irony in the meaning of the Hebrew name of this city. The name "Bethlehem" literally means "house of bread." But there is a famine that has come upon the residents of the city. There is no bread in the house of bread. God had promised abundance and plenty for his people if they held fast to him in faith. Instead of feasting and life, there is famine and death.

God had also promised in his covenant to bless them with many offspring. The families of Israel would increase in number and be bursting with life, joy, and abundance. Yet Ruth's story begins with an abundance of death. They leave Bethlehem for Moab in hopes that they might survive the famine. But Naomi's husband Elimelech dies. After this, her sons Mahlon and Chilion also die. There is nothing more heartbreaking than the premature death of family members. Naomi's self-confessed bitterness is a sad reminder of the grief and heartbreak we feel at this kind of traumatic loss. Beyond this Naomi has

no earthly hope for a provider and protector through a husband or a son--let alone hope in a coming king.

Naomi's life is filled with death, grief, heartbreak, and loss. Yet this is not something unique to her personally, or even to Israel nationally. Naomi's suffering is a microcosm of all of fallen humanity. It is amazing how easily we forget this when considering the "plan" of our lives. We often fall into a "fairy tale" framework for our lives, thinking that if we just attain some future goal or benchmark we will finally be free of trouble and "live happily ever after."

It is certainly true that our lives are still filled with God's blessings. But the one constant we can be certain to face in this sinful world is tragedy, disappointment, and death. One day those whom we love most will depart this life. One spouse will lay the other in the grave. Those of us who are parents dread the thought of having to bury our own children. Although famine is rare in the modern Western world, the death of spouses and children is still all too common. Ironically, it is not discussed much in our public discourse and many are left to bear the pain of these losses silently and alone. The estate in which we live is one of sin and misery. If our hope in God is for this life only, we are of all men the most to be pitied.

Surrounded by death, Naomi still has the hope of life. We will see this in the presence of faith in the one true God through her Moabite daughter-in-law. To see such a living faith in a pagan Moabite is a veritable resurrection from the dead, spiritually speaking. In her, we see the hope of life and abundance even in the face of death. By the end of the book Naomi's bitter losses will be replaced by the sweet joy of a new grandchild in her arms. All these are harbingers of a greater restoration to come, through a Savior-redeemer who will come from her genealogical line. In Christ, we will be delivered from the famine of the wilderness world and welcomed to the marriage feast of the lamb. Through him God's kingdom will come, bringing faith and obedience through his word and Spirit. In his kingdom, there will be no more bitterness in grief, loss, sadness. Death will be no more. This is our only true hope: the coming kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

#2 – Devotional Meditations on the Book of Ruth 1:6-22

The opening verses of the book of Ruth were objective and factual in character. Like many other historical books in the Bible, the focus is not on the internal thoughts or feelings of the characters. Books like the Psalms are quite different, allowing us to peer inside the heart of the inspired writers. These portions of Scripture allow us to see their internal wrestling with God's will, their cries of pain in times of trial, and their warm-hearted thanksgiving to God in times of blessing.

Every once in a while, the historical narratives of the Bible will allow us to see and hear what the characters are feeling. Sometimes the narrator tells us directly. Other times it is revealed through the voice of the character. Such is the case in Ruth 1:6-22. What we see is a mixture of the bitter agony of loss and the consolation of God's comforting grace. In both, we see an expression of faith in God's sovereign power and grace.

We first see a sign of God's grace at the end of the famine in Israel. Israel's sin and idolatry had resulted in famine and death. But God's hand of judgment has relented in mercy. The Lord had again visited his people and replenished them with food. God is a just God and will not let sin go unpunished. But he is also a merciful God, restoring health after sickness and feasting after famine. This restoration of food to Israel is a token and pledge of the possibility of personal restoration for Naomi and her family. His anger appeared for a moment, but a lifetime of possible favor is still possible.

Secondly, we also see Naomi's faith in God's sovereignty. In the acknowledgment on Naomi's part that all of her suffering was part of God's sovereign plan. In verse 13 she acknowledges this when she attributes her suffering to the fact that "the hand of the LORD has gone out against me." Later she acknowledges that it was the LORD who allowed her to go away full but come back empty (21). She is clearly overwhelmed by the bitterness of her sufferings. At the same time, she also maintains her hope in a future expression of God's mercy and grace. She pronounces a blessing upon Orpah and Ruth which expresses her faith in the continued kindness of God to them and her hope that they would find rest and blessing with a new husband and family (9-10).

It is true that she sees little hope for herself. The positive side of her acknowledgment of God's sovereign will is directly entirely to her daughter-in-law. She has hope for them, but not for herself. Still, Naomi articulates a seed of faith in God's continued goodness in the midst of trial.

Thirdly, we see God's grace expressed in Ruth's love and loyalty to Naomi. While Orpah leaves them, going back to her people and to her gods, Ruth stays with Naomi. The personal love and commitment

expressed in Ruth's words to Naomi also reveal their ultimate source: God himself. Ruth not only declares that she will personally stay with Naomi, but that "your people will be my people, and your God will be my God" (16). Although she is clearly bitter because of her emptiness and loss, the abiding presence of Ruth is a sign and pledge of the abiding presence of God's grace with her.

God's mercy to Naomi is thus revealed through human means. It is in Ruth that the tender compassion of God comforts her heart. Ruth's words clearly reveal this. But her words also revealed a transformed identity that also testifies to God's life-giving grace. While the Jewish nation has largely fallen into idolatry and unbelief, Ruth (the Moabite!) expresses faith in the God of Israel. Behind Ruth's words is a work of sovereign grace on the part of an almighty God. It constitutes a veritable transition from darkness to light.

Although she begins the book empty and bitter because of God's hard providence, she will end the book with the sweet fullness of a grandchild in her arms. While certainly meaningful on a personal level, this child will also have meaning in the fullness of redemptive history. For from Obed will come Jesse, and from Jesse will come King David. Through him, the Son of God would come to bring restoration of life and nourishment in old age.

In the book of Ruth, we see a microcosm of our lives in this world: a mixture of bitter sufferings and the blessed hope of the glorious appearing of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. There is no immunity or escape from trouble and suffering in this world. At times God may be pleased to allow us to experience, loss, bitterness, and death. But in this book, we are reminded that such things will not endure forever. With faith and patience, we will await God's relief from our personal trials in the fullness of life and blessedness in the world to come through Christ our Lord.

#3 – Devotional Meditations on the Book of Ruth 2:1-23

The book of Ruth began on an exceptionally low note. The opening scene was one of famine, death, pain, and bitterness. But the God, who was pleased to bring a time of pain, and death is proving himself also to be a restorer of life. After their sojourn in Moab, Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem. The Lord has visited his people and given them food. The emptiness of famine is giving way to the fullness of harvest. Although God had judged his people for their sin, his promise of grace stands firm. His anger is for a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime.

In chapter 2 this story of restoration advances another step. God does work to “fix” everything all at once but is often pleased to work slowly through incremental stages. Ruth asks Naomi to allow her to go into the field to glean after the reapers. Gleaning was permitted in Israel to ensure that the impoverished and destitute would have access to food to sustain themselves (Deut. 24:19). But when she arrives and gets to her work, she finds more than just food. The field in which she is gleaning belongs to Boaz of the clan of Elimelech. Although their story begins with curse and death, Boaz meets her (and the other reapers) with words of blessing (2:4). His words are no empty greeting. He adds to his words deeds of care and protection. As a young Moabite woman, Ruth would have been more vulnerable to possible mistreatment. Boaz ensures that she not only food but also protective care. Step by step, God’s restoring grace is at work in their lives.

But Boaz’s kindness has a deeper foundation than simple courtesy to a stranger. Ruth herself inquires of Boaz as to the reason for his exceptional kindness to her. Boaz reveals that he has heard the story of her loyalty to Naomi after the tragedy that befell them. Most significantly, he has heard of her leaving her family and native land to find shelter in the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings she has taken refuge. She has committed her life to God and his people. In this covenant relationship of faith and loyalty, there is reciprocity. God will honor those who honor him and care for those who trust in him. The fact that she is a Gentile clearly anticipates the day when God’s salvation will stretch beyond the borders of Israel and be sent forth into all nations.

The fruit of this divine care is obvious. Where she was once empty, she is now full. She eats and is satisfied with extra that is left over. Famine has given way to abundance. Danger has been replaced with protective care. The looming threat of death gives way to visible confidence in sustained life.

Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi has been repaid with the fruit of the loyalty of the God of Israel. This came to her through human means in the figure of Boaz, but the divine source is clearly evident in the narrative. Naomi deepens these connections when she reveals that Boaz is a close relative and therefore one of their redeemers.

In this way, Boaz is a picture of our final redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. In his incarnation, he became like his brothers in every way so that he might be a faithful and merciful redeemer. In his crucifixion, he suffered hunger, thirst, and death that he might fill us with the fullness of his life. Through Christ, we who trust in him are under God's protective and nurturing care. We await the fullness of God's blessedness in the world to come. There we will not simply glean along the edges of God's harvest field but be invited to feast at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

#4 - Devotional Meditations on the Book of Ruth 3:1-23

Sin and idolatry have brought emptiness to the land of Israel. The garden of God has become a wasteland. Instead of plenty and abundance, there is famine. Instead of life and increase, there is death and decay. Naomi and Ruth are not immune to the effects of the curse. With the death of their husbands, they now have empty families. With the famine in Israel, they had empty stomachs and only the prospect of starvation. But God has visited his people. Where there was famine he has brought food. Where there was death he brings life. Bitter sorrow is turning to sweet joy. Loss is being replaced with new gain.

Step by step through the story of Ruth we are seeing the Lord work his restoring grace through a kinsman redeemer. It was revealed at the end of the last chapter that Boaz was a close relative of Naomi. As such, he had the right and obligation to serve as a kinsman-redeemer. This was a special role a sibling or close relative would have to pay off debts or otherwise make provision for a destitute person. Although the role had a theocratic flavor to it in the Mosaic law, the general principle that underly it is very much moral in nature. Paul tells us that the man who does not to make provision for his family—especially the members of his own household—has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8). Whether under the theocracy or out of it, the basic moral duties of a kinsman-redeemer are an expression of the faithfulness, love, and benevolence of God.

Some wrongly interpret the interaction between Ruth and Boaz in this passage to be sexual in nature. Such an interpretation is not only not warranted by the language of the text, it flies in the face of the broader characterization of Ruth and Boaz in the narrative. In the previous chapter, Boaz spread out his protective care over Ruth in part by charging the young men not to touch her (2:9). The other aspects of his provision and protection of her are clearly reflective of the protection and love of God. Fornication (i.e. sexual relations outside of marriage) is an impure evil in the sight of God. It makes little sense for a figure so considered about the pure and holy word of God to quickly turn and walk in impurity. Likewise, in the scene, Boaz is presented as sleeping during the initial encounter. Furthermore, Boaz commends Ruth for her seeking to walk within the will of the God of Israel, pursuing protection through the proper person (i.e. a close relative regardless of age or financial status). Boaz also recognizes that he does not have the first right as a redeemer, since there is a relative in town who is more closely related than he is. Finally, he ensures that her pure reputation is protected by ensuring that no gossip spreads regarding her coming to the threshing floor at night. He also notes that she has a reputation for righteousness among the people (3:11). The point of Naomi's instructions appears to be to arrange a situation in which Naomi can present her request privately to Boaz. As a Moabite woman, it's clear that some might misunderstand her request or perceive it as inappropriate.

But the most basic point of the chapter is to express the redemptive love and mercy of God to his people—especially the most weak and vulnerable. Ruth’s request that Boaz “spread [his] wings over” her is not only a vivid image from God’s creation—a bird hovering over its young to feed them and protect them from predators. It’s a vivid image used to describe God the Creator, who through the Spirit of God hovered over the waters in the beginning, giving light and life to the empty, formless void of the universe. Here this God comes to the emptiness of sin, giving life and sustenance to Ruth as he did to his people of old in the Exodus. At that time God carried them on eagle’s wings and brought them to himself (Ex. 19:4). In the fullness of time, God would send our ultimate kinsman-redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, we would also receive the Spirit of God sent from heaven, who descended like a dove to protect us from the danger and impurity of the devil. Jesus is our king in whom the love and care of God expressed to Ruth finds its ultimate fulfillment.

#5 - Devotional Meditations on the Book of Ruth 4:1-22

The book of Ruth began with poignant personal tragedy. Naomi suffered the loss of her husband and sons. The famine that caused their death was the result of Israel’s sin. There is a deeply personal side

to this ordeal that is expressed in the voice of the characters. Their emotional agony is not hidden from us.

But the tragedy of Israel's sin also had relevance to their relationship to the land. Recall that the land of Israel had special typological significance. It pointed them to the land of heaven above. As long as the nation was walking in faith they would receive the blessing and bounty of the land. When they walked in unbelief and rebellion the land would experience curse. If they persisted despite God's chastisements, they would eventually be exiled from the land in a foreign country. Interestingly, this future exile was anticipated in the era of the Judges. A microcosm of this future judgment comes upon them ahead of time when they are subjected to oppression from a foreign nation.

Exile and judgment mean the loss of both life and land. God's work of redemption restores them both.

As we come to Ruth 4, we see this process of restoration come to fulfillment for Naomi and Ruth. Famine had meant the death of their husbands. They had no earthly provider or protector. This also endangered the perpetuation of land inheritance. Thankfully, God had providentially led them to a kinsman-redeemer in the figure of Boaz. The only problem was that there was a nearer relative in town who had the first right and responsibility of redemption. This may seem to be an added bonus. Two redeemers mean there is a backup fail-safe option in case of an "emergency." The problem is that given the rank unfaithfulness in Israel during the era of the Judges, they could not be certain of the character of the other redeemer. Boaz had proven himself to be a man of integrity and the fear of God. He would be an agent of God's protecting care. Even as they had taken refuge under the wings of the Almighty, so would they find refuge in Boaz's loving care.

This final uncertainty is rectified in the first part of chapter 4, where the other possible kinsman-redeemer ultimately rejects it. At first, he agrees to redeem the land of Naomi's family. But when he learns that he must also marry Ruth to perpetuate their family's name he changes his mind. On the surface, he claims his own financial hardship. But the order of the discussion reveals his deeper motivation. He does not wish to acquire Ruth as his wife. On the surface, he claims a financial hardship. He does not wish to suffer loss to save another. It could also be that because Ruth is a Moabite, he also does not want to suffer the reproach of having a foreigner as his wife.

None of these things matter to Boaz. He sees through the "surface-level" reproach of marrying Ruth because he knows that in her heart she loves and serves the God of Israel. Like Rahab before her, Ruth is a Gentile who is enfolded through faith in the promise of God's gracious restoration. God consigns Israel to disobedience so that through their fall redemption might come to all nations. The future worldwide spread of the Gospel is thus anticipated through her restoration.

And it is not without significance that all this takes place in the town of Bethlehem in Judah. In the fullness of times, a Redeemer would come from this very location—a descendant of Ruth through King David. He will be our nourisher in famine, giving us spiritual food through the bread of life that is his word. He will be to us a restorer of life, bringing us the fullness of life through his resurrection from the dead. He will be a flawless deliverer restoring us permanently to the land of God above. Instead of weeping due to bitter losses, we will rejoice in the sweetness of the fullness of life in the provision and protection of his kingdom which will know no end.