

The Gleaning Lady

Ruth 1:1-2 September 7, 2025

Some short stories just stick with you. I remember reading *The Tell-Tale Heart* in seventh grade and haven't been able to forget it since. *The Legend Of Sleepy Hollow*, *The Most Dangerous Game*, *The Metamorphosis*, *3:10 To Yuma*, *Rip Van Winkle*, they're short, but they leave a lasting impression.

Famous short stories are rarely love stories. *The Gift Of The Magi* is an exception, so is the one we're beginning today. It is the most widely published short story of all time: The Book of Ruth.

It's been called the most beautiful short story ever written.¹ But it is not only a beautiful story, it is a *powerful* portion of Holy Scripture, crowded with treasure.

Because of its short length and small-scale, it's easy for us to have a small view of what this book is about. That it's *just* a love story. Or, if we're being a little more theological, that this book is just an allegory of how Christ Jesus is *our* Kinsman-Redeemer. And, yes, this book does depict that wonderful heavenly truth in vivid illustration. *But*, as you read and reread these verses, you will find it is more than a single-issue parable. It is more than a romantic comedy.² These 4 chapters contain layer after layer of truth and instruction for *all kinds* of circumstances and situations, for our relationships and responsibilities, for our the choices and chapters of life.

In other words, we shouldn't think of Ruth the way husbands and boyfriends sometimes think of certain movies as "chick flicks." I suppose that if we were to survey 100 different Christian mens' conferences, I doubt we would find even *one* that was using Ruth as its subject. But maybe we should. Because the more we read this book, the more we see it touching every phase of life, for women *and* for men. For husbands, for fathers, for wives and widows, for boyfriends, for girlfriends, for Christians and those seeking salvation. For those walking with God and those trying to find their way back to Him. Every time you squeeze this book, no matter what side you press, sweet, nourishing, spiritual nectar comes pouring out.

We can learn so much because, on the one hand, God shows us how His providence and kindness work hand and hand with His word and His promises. But we also learn much because of the depth of the three main characters. They are Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. Though Ruth is the central figure upon which the story hinges, of the three characters, she speaks the least.³ That's significant when we realize that 55 of the 85 verses are dialogue.

But each of the characters is so unique and distinct, both in what's going on in their hearts and what God is doing in their lives. Yet they are woven together as God accomplishes good for them.

¹ Frank Gaebelein, et al. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 3: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*

² Ironically, one *could* classify Ruth as a rom-com in the sense that, as Lord Byron suggests, "All tragedies are finished by a death. All comedies are ended by a marriage."

³ Daniel Block *The New American Commentary, Volume 6: Judges, Ruth*

We have Naomi, the bitter widow, learning how to return to God after a long period of anger and backsliding. She learns to trust God again and how the ways of man are often *not* the ways of God.

We have Ruth, who is convinced that Yahweh is the One true God. She is willing to do whatever is necessary to devote herself to Him, though she is at a total disadvantage since she was formerly a pagan Moabitess. In fact, her only hope is to be rescued and protected and provided for by a redeemer. She learns and demonstrates that God has love for anyone who trusts in Him.

We have Boaz. A man who walked with God and helped others walk with Him. A man who took his beliefs and his spiritual duties seriously, even when few around him did. A man who was used by God to not only save a family, but become a conduit for the salvation for *all* families.

With a cast like that, we're in for a great story!

There are a few remarkable features of this book that are easy for us to miss. First, this is the *only* Old Testament book that is named for a non-Israelite.⁴ Second, as a book, Ruth has historically floated in its position among the other books of the Old Testament. We have it right after Judges, which is appropriate because, as we'll see, that's the time period in which this story occurred. In fact, it has been seen as a companion to Judges the way Lamentations is paired with Jeremiah.⁵ But manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible put it elsewhere. In some manuscripts it comes directly after Proverbs 31. Why does that matter? Well, many of you know that Proverbs closes with a passage telling us where we can find a wife of noble character. It's a beautiful passage.

Did you know there is only *one* woman in the Bible who is actually described as a woman of noble character? Guess who? *Ruth!*⁶ So, the ideal wife is demonstrated by this *Moabitess*? How is *that* possible? It's possible because of what *God* does in her life and through her story.

There are a few other really fun surprises that we'll have to save for later, but I look forward to sharing them with you. Like how this is a book that has a mind blowing, end-of-credits stinger which sets up a sequel we can't wait to see.

But let's look at the opening. We're only going to get to the setting today. As a short story, it's good to look carefully and deliberately as we're going to do on Sunday mornings a little at a time. But it's also just as good for us to hear the story all at once, which is easy to do. You can listen to the whole thing in less than 15 minutes. And I'd encourage all of you to listen to it once a day, a couple times a week. I have been extremely benefitted from just putting it on and listening on a regular basis.

The story begins,

⁴ Block

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Miles Van Pelt *Survey Of The Old Testament - Ruth*

Ruth 1:1 - During the time of the judges, there was a famine in the land. A man left Bethlehem in Judah with his wife and two sons to stay in the territory of Moab for a while.

A book's opening sentences can tell you a *lot* in a few words. *1984* famously begins with, "It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."

"During the time of the judges" is a line that tells us a lot. That puts us somewhere between 1200 and 1020 BC.⁷ But more important than the *when* is the *what* of that time. What was life like?

Judges ends with this ominous line: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever seemed right to him."⁸ This is after a truly disturbing set of stories, particularly of how the men of Benjamin had to go and violently *steal* wives after the other tribes of Israel had killed a bunch of their own countrymen and promised to never marry their daughters to Benjaminites.

And now, God follows up with a different story - the story of a marriage *not* based on theft or violence, but based on *hesed* - that active, merciful, saving love. The *opposite* of Judges 19-21.

The time of the judges was a very *bad* time for God's people. Life was cheap. Governments came and went. Israel was overrun by oppressors for long periods of time until a hero was raised up to deliver them. No one was safe, sometimes even from the other tribes of Israel. Your neighbor might believe in God, *or* he might have totally Canaanized and paganized, following the horrific practices of the nations around you.

The *when* is as bad as it gets. But that is one of the most amazing things about this book. In the worst of times we will see God loving His people, helping His people, blessing His people, and that His people can still live day-to-day lives of faithful, thankful, joyful, meaningful spirituality. That even though the rest of the world is *much* worse than what we experience today, look at Ruth. Look at Boaz. See their fruitfulness and joy and satisfaction in the Lord.

Now the where. We start in Bethlehem, but only long enough here to see a family packing up the U-Haul and moving out.

Israelites were meant to *stay* in their allotted inheritance. That was *their* land, given by God to their tribe. So it's a big deal for them to leave. Why are they leaving?

Well, there's a famine in the land. Now, this should make all sorts of alarms go off in our minds. Because, first of all, we've seen this happen before: God's people, facing famine, moving out of town. *Usually* it does not go well. Usually it's a huge mistake. And, indeed a mistake is being made here - one that leads to death. Now, God will bring life from the ashes, but this is not a good move.

⁷ Robert Hubbard, Jr. *The Book Of Ruth*

⁸ Judges 21:25

But, if God was faithful, *why* was there a famine? Well, it's the time of the Judges. While there was always a remnant of faithful believers, generally speaking, people did what was right in their own eyes. They abandoned God and His word. And famine was the result. Go all the way back to the Law, this is what God said. He said, "If you turn your back on Me and follow other gods, then I have to judge you. You're going to have famine and conflict and all sorts of problems." Deuteronomy 28, 32, Leviticus 26. It was a very clear covenant and one that the people of Israel agreed to. But now they were violating the contract and living out the consequences.

This family decided they had enough. They're leaving Bethlehem. And where do they go? They go to stay in Moab for "a while." Now pay attention to what's said there. That word "stay" is the word for "sojourn." "We're just going to pass through for a while," they say. "It isn't permanent. We're not really walking away from the Lord. We're just looking out for our needs."

But Moab is not just across town, it's not even just across to the other side of the tracks. Moab is across the *Jordan*. And Moab was a place God had *specifically* marked as unacceptable for His people. It was essentially in what we would call their constitution. In Deuteronomy 23, God says "Don't despise an Edomite and don't even despise an Egyptian. But a *Moabite* can *never* enter the Lord's assembly!" He goes on to say, "*Never* pursue their welfare or prosperity as long as you live."⁹

They shouldn't go to Moab for a vacation, let alone relocate there.¹⁰ This family has abandoned their inheritance, their culture, their community, and their God. Bethlehem is a word that means "breadbasket,"¹¹ but they didn't have enough bread. They were likely moving to the fertile plateau of Moab, which was the closest and most easily accessible to them.¹² This was a place known as the breadbasket of Palestine.¹³

We must conclude that their move was economic. That they have decided God can no longer be counted on to provide for them. Oh, they tell themselves they're just going for a little while, till they can get back on their feet, but it becomes clear very quickly that they're lying to themselves.

Ruth 1:2 - ² The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife's name was Naomi. The names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the fields of Moab and settled there.

Ah, so you're *not* just sojourning, you're *settling* there. Some of the worst lies are the lies we tell ourselves. The way we rationalize our resistance to the Lord's word and His leading. The term used was a technical one: They were becoming resident aliens in Moab.¹⁴ We'll see they go all in on Moabite culture. They marry into the Moabite community. After 10 years, Naomi says to her

⁹ Deuteronomy 23:3-8

¹⁰ Jonathan Prime *Opening Up Ruth*

¹¹ Gaebelstein

¹² Edward Campbell, Jr. *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*

¹³ Hubbard

¹⁴ Frederic Bush *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 9: Ruth/Esther*

daughters-in-law, "Go back to your gods. They're just as good or better than Yahweh." This is a dramatic movement away from the God of Israel.

Interestingly, Elimelech's name means "God is my king."¹⁵ That phrase may be on his lips every day, or coming from Naomi every day when she called her husband's name, but where was their faith? It was in the soft soil of Moab. But we'll see that this place that Elimelech was so convinced would be the site of new life for his family ended up only being the site of his grave and the graves of his sons. He defied God's principles, He defied God's leading, He stopped believing in God's promises or His trustworthiness, and the result was ruin and death.

This story *starts* with a family of God's people doing *exactly* what what we see in Judges - they do what's right in their own eyes. And predictably, it's a disaster. The bleak spiritual setting makes the faith of Ruth and Boaz shine all the brighter. With *this* backdrop, they believe and follow God.

One scholar writes, *"In Judges 17-21 all of the major characters balk in the face of challenge. Priests, landowners, husbands, wives, and warriors all abandon their responsibilities. In Ruth, however, the main characters valiantly shoulder their responsibilities, however burdensome."*¹⁶

By now we might be wondering, "Well, how in the world can anything good happen for a Moabite like Ruth? Isn't she absolutely disqualified from *any* sort of acceptance among the people of God? How could she become the great-grandmother of Israel's most famous king?"

And this is one of the great wonders of Ruth. It shows us a side of the Law that we don't see that often. We often see the stringent requirements and the strict punishments, right? But in this book we'll see these other legal provisions of how the outsider, the destitute, the hopeless can be rescued and brought into the family, *even if* they came from Moab. We'll see the provisions of charity gleaning, of Levirate marriage, of the restoration of forfeited inheritance, of conversion and acceptance that are there *in the Law* for those who are willing to believe and obey.

Ruth shows that God's order flows from His *hesed* love. We've talked about it before, we'll talk about it again, but *hesed* is a loyal love of action, where a stronger party acts with compassion on behalf of a helpless weaker party. God does it for us and we are then called to do it for others - the way Ruth does for Naomi and the way Boaz does for Ruth. In fact, as one commentator notes, *"The book of Ruth holds out the practice of hesed as the ideal lifestyle for Israel...Though rare, risky, and restrictive, the practice of...hesed...pleases God so much that one may reasonably expect repayment in kind from Him...Only those who do it may receive it."*¹⁷

There is so much for us in the passages ahead. It is a book that *keeps* on teaching. What would you like to hear God speak to you about? Do you need to hear about His redeeming love for you? About how the hopeless can find hope? About how to be a faithful believer in the worst of times?

¹⁵ Gaebelstein

¹⁶ Michael Moore *To King Or Not To King: A Canonical-Historical Approach To Ruth*

¹⁷ Hubbard

Do you want to learn something about the history-shaping providence of God that operates in *your* life? Do you want to learn about how to return to God after falling away from Him? Do you want to know how to *practically* discover God's will for your life? Do you want to see how God's tender kindness leads us to repentance or how we can participate with His life-changing work through simple acts of obedience? Do you want to know how to find a great husband or a dynamite gal? Do you want to know how you should treat your boyfriend or girlfriend, your employees or your boss? Do you want to know what *God* thinks success looks like or how to start worshipping Him again if you're love for Him has cooled?

It's all here in these four little chapters. All that and more. This is a short story that can change our lives because it is a story of God living powerfully in and *through* our lives, in small ways and big ways if we are willing to not only believe, not only have a Christian heritage and culture, but a Christian life that bears real fruit.

But the question we'll need to answer as we go is: Whose story is mine? Am I living a Boaz life? Am I living like Ruth? Am I Naomi? Or, today, am I Elimilech? Have I lied to myself and convinced myself that all I need is a spiritual name - I'm a cultural believer - and the rest of it is up to me. I'll find my own way. I make my own decisions. God isn't really around to help me, anyway. Am I lying to myself that the temptations of Moab won't lead to disaster in my life? That God doesn't want me to seek Him, but instead seek the returns of the world around me?

There is a lot for us to glean from this story about a gleaning lady who was part of the most important story of all: The story of Jesus. *That's* a story we're still a part of today if we're willing to hear, to believe, to obey, and to let God do in us what He has done all along.