

Lessons from Bible Women – Ruth & Naomi

Reading: Ruth 1:16 “...*Your people shall be my people, and your God my God*¹.”

Introduction:

We often look at examples of faithful men in the Old Testament from whom we can draw lessons about living faithfully for God. But faithfulness in the Old Testament was not restricted to just men. There are also notable women recorded in those pages who can be examples for us today. (There are also some unfaithful women from whom we can learn some lessons as well.) Therefore, for the next few lessons, I want us to look at some of these women and the things that happened during their lives to see what we can learn from them.

Today, we will be looking at Ruth, the great-grand-mother of King David, and her mother in law, Naomi.

LESSON

1) Naomi's influence and Ruth's decision

At one point during the time of the Judges (1360-1020BC), there was a famine in Palestine that caused a man from Bethlehem to move to Moab² with his wife and two sons. The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife's name was Naomi (**Ruth 1:1-2**). But while they were living in Moab, Elimelech died, so Naomi was left alone with her two sons. (**Ruth 1:3**).

Now the two sons then married Moabite women – one was named Orpah, and the other, Ruth – and they lived in Moab for about 10 years (**Ruth 1:4**). However, the sons then died, leaving Naomi alone with her two daughters-in-law (**Ruth 1:5**).

Naomi then heard that things had improved back in her homeland, so she decided to move back there (**Ruth 1:6-7**). On the way, she exhorted her two daughters-in-law to return to their own families in Moab. Initially, both daughters stated that they wanted to stay with Naomi, but eventually, Orpah went back to her own people (**Ruth 1:14-15**). However Ruth made this statement in **Ruth 1:16**;

“Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.”

And so, rather than stay in her own country and be amongst people and surroundings with which she was familiar, Ruth chose to go with Naomi and be with the people of God.

2) Ruth's care for others

Naomi had returned to Bethlehem at the time of the harvest (**Ruth 1:22**). Now there was a requirement in the Law of Moses that those who had crops were to leave some of their crop in the field for those who were poor, the widows, and the fatherless (**Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19**). And so Ruth went out to pick

¹ All biblical quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

² Moab was a country on the south-eastern side of the Dead Sea. The people were descendants from the incestuous relationship between one of Lot's daughters and her father (**Genesis 19:36-37**).

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some of these gleanings so that she and Naomi could have food to eat (**Ruth 2:2**). When she came to the fields of grain, she asked the servant in charge of the reapers for permission to follow the reapers and gather the grain that was left on the ground after them (**Ruth 2:5-7**).

Boaz approached Ruth and told her to remain in his field and to stay close to the other young women who were also in the field (**Ruth 2:8-9**). Ruth bowed down and asked Boaz why he was showing such kindness towards her, a foreigner. Boaz told her that he had heard of her kindness towards Naomi (**Ruth 2:10-13**).

At mealtime, Boaz invited her to eat at the table with the reapers, and while there, she kept back some of the food she was given so that she could take some back to Naomi (**Ruth 2:14, 18**). Boaz also instructed his workers to deliberately leave bundles of grain behind in the field for Ruth to gather up (**Ruth 2:15-16**).

At the end of the day, she threshed out the grain from the stalks she had gleaned and collected an ephah³ of barley (**Ruth 2:17**). She then took the grain and the food that she had kept back and gave it to Naomi (**Ruth 2:18**). Ruth continued to glean in Boaz's field until the harvest was complete (**Ruth 2:23**).

3) Ruth and Boaz marry

The story of Ruth would not be complete without mentioning the marriage of Boaz and Ruth.

Naomi was concerned for the on-going security of Ruth, and so she set in train a series of events that brought Boaz and Ruth closer together (**Ruth 3:1-4**).

There was a requirement under the Law that if a married man died without leaving a son, then a close relative of the man had to take the widow as a wife in order to continue the dead man's family name (**Deuteronomy 25:5-6**). Now while Boaz was a close relative, there was another man who was closer (**Ruth 3:12**). So Boaz gave the closer relative the opportunity to take Ruth as a wife (**Ruth 4:1-5**). However, the closer relative did not want to fulfil the duty, and so passed it to Boaz (**Ruth 4:6**). Once the transfer of duty had been witnessed by the city elders (**Ruth 4:7-12**), Boaz took Ruth as his wife (**Ruth 4:13**).

- Boaz and Ruth subsequently begot Obed, Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David (**Ruth 4:21-22; Matthew 1:5-6**).

4) God's providence

Before we look at the lessons that we can learn from the lives of Ruth and Naomi, I want us to see the providence of God in all this.

Firstly, notice the timing of the news that Naomi received in Moab about things being better in her homeland (**Ruth 1:6**). The timing was such that when she and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, it was harvest time. This meant that they would be able to get access to food via the "gleaning" process.

Secondly, the field that Ruth happened to be gleaning in belonged to her close relative, Boaz – a man who was righteous and generous who looked after his

³ An ephah is about ½ bushell, which, when talking about flour, is about 12 kilos.

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people (**Ruth 2:4, 9, 16**), and who eventually became her husband. The Lord truly watches over those who are righteous (**Psalm 34:15-22**).

5) Lessons for us

There are several lessons that we can learn from this account of history, but I would just like to look at two of them.

a) Naomi's influence on Ruth to follow the true God

Ruth was from Moab (**Ruth 1:4**), a country that followed false gods (**1:15b**). However, it would appear that Naomi had been a great influence in Ruth's life during those 10 years that she was her daughter-in-law (**1:3b-4**). When Naomi chose to return home to Bethlehem, Ruth chose to leave her own people and her own country in order to go with Naomi to follow the true God and to be with His people. This says something about the positive influence Naomi had on Ruth.

In **Matthew 5:13-16** we are commanded by Jesus to be “*salt*” – *i.e.* to be a positive influence in the world. In verse **14**, we are to be “*lights*”.

We live in a world that is lost in sin. Because the world either does not know the truth, or if it does know it, it rejects it, it stumbles around in spiritual darkness (**Romans 1:20-25; Ephesians 4:17-19**). A light is used to allow people to see what they are doing, or where they are going when it is dark. For example, when we travel at night, we use lights to guide us on our way.

As spiritual “lights”, we are to guide people to the Lord; we are to show people how God wants us to live with each other and to serve Him – in our attitudes, in our words, and in our deeds (*e.g.* **Titus 2:7-8**). This requires us to constantly “... *examine ourselves* ...” to make sure that our life does reflect the ways of Christ (**2 Corinthians 13:5**);

- do we have the same sinful, worldly attitudes that we see in the bulk of society? Or are we trying to imitate Christ (*e.g.* **Matthew 5:43-48; 1 Corinthians 11:1**)?
- do we speak in the same crude way that we often hear in the streets and the media? Or do we use speech that builds people up, and edifies them (*e.g.* **Ephesians 4:29**)?
- are we concerned only for self? Or are we prepared to help others – even if it means it will cost us in some way (**Philippians 2:3-5**) ?
- do we decide whether something is right or wrong based on what society says or thinks? or is our decision based on what God's Word says? (*e.g.* **Matthew 4:4, 7, 10** “... *it is written* ...”)

If we are just like the rest of the world, then our influence on others to lead them to Christ will be minimal - we will no longer be lights.

Let us be like Naomi and be a positive influence for God in this world.

b) Ruth showed humility, thoughtfulness and gratitude towards others, and received favour in return

Ruth was helpful and kind. She not only followed her mother-in-law, but she also did things to help her (implied in **Ruth 2:11**) She was also

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humble and respectful. When she went to the fields to glean some grain, she asked permission from the servant who was in charge of the reapers (**Ruth 2:6-7**). When she was given a meal, she set aside some of the food for Naomi (**Ruth 2:14, 18**). When approached by Boaz for the first time, she showed respect to him (*i.e.* she bowed down before him), and acknowledged that she was a foreigner in the land (**Ruth 2:10**). And so, because of her attitude and because of what she had done for Naomi, she was treated favourably by Boaz (**Ruth 2:11-16; 3:15**).

In **Galatians 6:7-8**, we read;

⁷ *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*

⁸ *For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life."*

The context of these verses is in relation to sharing with others. But the principles quoted here also apply to life in general – that is, that the outcome of your life will depend on what direction you set it. If you want to live with worldly values and follow the ways of the world, then don't expect your life to have a godly outcome. If you want to live a life pleasing to the Lord (**Colossians 1:10**), then you need to pursue the things of the Spirit – *e.g.* **Galatians 5:22-23**.

So what does this mean in practical terms when it comes to our relationship with God and other people?

Firstly, we read in **Proverbs 23:7a**, "*for as he thinks in his heart, so is he.*" The direction of your life will be determined by the things that dwell in your heart. Jesus reinforced this fact when He said in **Matthew 12:35**;

"A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things."

Therefore, if we want to receive God's favour, then we first need to have a fundamental desire in our heart to want to do what God says (**Psalms 119:36**); to want to live the way that God wants us to live; to want to pursue the things of the Spirit. This is where it all starts – the heart. Without this desire in our heart, we are bound to give up trying to live faithfully when the difficult times comes.

Secondly, the way we think about and treat other people (including our enemies) will have an impact on how other people and God will treat us.

In the days of Isaiah (around 700 BC), the nation of Judah was unfaithful to the Lord. Yes, they were still offering up the various sacrifices to God, but He was rejecting them (**Isaiah 1:11-15**). And one of the key reasons was this: their ill treatment of others – **Isaiah 1:21-23**. Therefore, God appealed to them to treat others fairly – **Isaiah 1:16-17**.

And so we come to us today. The principle is still the same: our relationship with God is affected by our relationship with other people. For example;

- if we are harsh and judgemental towards others, then that is how God and other people will judge us (**Matthew 7:2**).

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- if we are unloving and unforgiving, then God will not forgive us (**Matthew 6:15**).

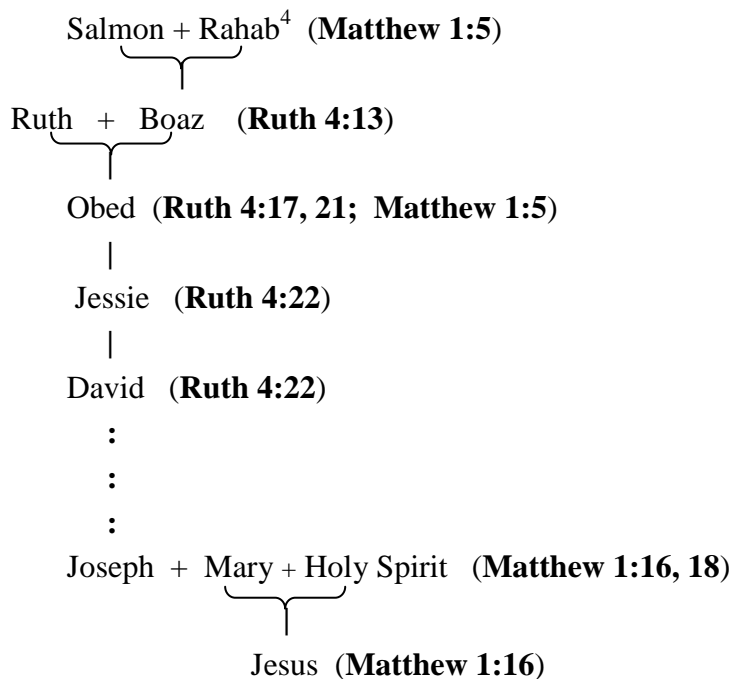
whereas,

- if we live humbly, then God will exalt us in due time (**1 Peter 5:6**).
- if we live in an understanding and respectful manner with our spouse, then God will hear our prayers (**1 Peter 3:7**).
- if we forgive others, then God will forgive us (**Matthew 6:14**).
- if we bless those who treat us badly, then we inherit a blessing from God (**Matthew 5:44; 1 Peter 3:9**).

Ruth received favour from Boaz, and was blessed by God, because of her attitude towards others. We will be blessed by God if we follow her example.

These two women, Ruth and Naomi, may seem like just another couple of women, living in a small city in Judah many centuries ago. But their lives have been recorded forever in the pages of the Bible as lessons for us all. They were two women who cared very much for each other's welfare. They displayed the qualities and characteristics that God calls on us to have – a godly influence on others, and a humble, thoughtful and grateful heart.

ANNEX A The place of Ruth in the lineage of Jesus



⁴ Possibly the same Rahab of **Joshua 2:1-21; 6:23, 25** and **Hebrews 11:31**.