

Ruth 1:1–4 (CEB)

During the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. A man with his wife and two sons went from Bethlehem of Judah to dwell in the territory of Moab. ²The name of that man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the territory of Moab and settled there.

³But Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died. Then only she was left, along with her two sons. ⁴They took wives for themselves, Moabite women; the name of the first was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth. And they lived there for about ten years.

Ruth 1:15–18 (CEB)

¹⁵Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law."

¹⁶But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you." ¹⁸When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her about it.

Ruth 3:1–5 (CEB)

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shouldn't I seek security for you, so that things might go well for you? ²Now isn't Boaz, whose young women you were with, our relative? Tonight he will be winnowing barley at the threshing floor. ³You should bathe, put on some perfume, wear nice clothes, and then go down to the threshing floor. Don't make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴When he lies down, notice the place where he is lying. Then go, uncover his feet, and lie down. And he will tell you what to do."

⁵Ruth replied to her, "I'll do everything you are telling me."

Naomi. Supporting actor . . . or more?

When Oscar season rolls around, I sometimes have trouble figuring out why some performances are worthy of "Best Actor" and others are labeled a supporting role.¹ That's the case for this week's story. Why is the story called "Ruth" when it could just as easily be called "Naomi"? In a way, I suppose that both are "supporting actors" in the sense that this is the story of two women overcoming terrible troubles by God's grace and their devotion to each other.

Their story

Naomi and her husband were living in Israel during the time of the judges (1100-1200BC) when a famine drove them to leave their home and head southeastward to Moab. There they made a new home, where all was well until Naomi's husband died. Yet even after Elimelech's death, Naomi was all right. Though a widow, she had two able sons to provide for her and to protect her. Both sons married local women, Orpah² and Ruth.

¹ So I looked it up. The distinction between "Best Actor/Actress" and "Supporting Actor/Actress" in the Oscars is determined by the voters at the time of balloting. No wonder it seems so confusing at times!

² Oprah Winfrey tells the story that she was named after Orpah in the book of Ruth, but that her parents misspelled the name. (Isn't it amazing the things you learn in these studies.)

But ten years later, tragedy struck Naomi again. Naomi's sons died and the three women, now widows, were left alone. In the ancient world, being without a husband or sons was about as big a tragedy as might befall a woman.³

Naturally, Naomi decided to head back to Israel, hoping to find family and rebuild her life. Naomi was accompanied by her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But, taking pity on them, Naomi urged them to turn around and stay in Moab, among their own families. So Orpah headed home . . . but Ruth did not. Instead, Ruth pledged to follow Naomi, going where Naomi goes, worshiping Naomi's god as her own. But this was not the end of their story; it was only the beginning.

The Time of the Judges

Ruth and Naomi lived more than 3,000 years ago during the period in Israel's history known as the time of the judges. It was a violent age, as Israel sought to complete its conquest of Canaan, the land promised them by God. The Israelites had no king, for God was to be their king. Instead, the chief administrators were known as judges, and their stories are told in the Old Testament book of Judges. Samson, Gideon, Deborah and others were judges during this time.

The time of the judges was also marked by great faithlessness, as the Israelites descended down a spiral that would lead them further and further from God. The last verse of Judges is a biting indictment of the Israelites: "In those days there was no king of Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

The faithfulness of Ruth and Naomi, to God and to each other, is in stark contrast with the faithlessness of Israel. Perhaps this is partly why the story of their friendship was cherished and passed on.

Upon their arrival in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem, these two unlikely friends set about the rebuilding of their lives. Given all she had been through, it is no surprise that Naomi was deeply embittered: "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty," she told the women in Bethlehem. Naomi, whose name meant "sweetness," even wanted to take a new name, Mara, based on the Hebrew word for "bitter." Naomi needed restoration and renewal – she needed to be redeemed.

Despite Naomi's despair, Ruth decided to go into the fields, gathering what grain was left by the harvesters, hoping that someone would notice her. Someone did. Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's, not only noticed Ruth, he eventually married her. How their union comes about is a touching and somewhat complicated story that consumes much of the book. And it is clear that the union would not have happened without Naomi's intervention and guidance.

After the marriage, we are told that "when they came together, the LORD made her conceive and she bore a son" (Ruth 4:13). The women of Bethlehem knew that this child, Ruth's son, would be Naomi's redeemer, legally bound to look after her in her old age, saving her from the ravages of widowhood. But this was no mere legal matter. We understand this when we are told that "Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse." This tiny infant, a gift given to Ruth by God, is a gift also given to Naomi, a gift that will make her whole.

But even with this, the story is not complete. The infant, cuddled and hugged by Naomi, would grow to be the grandfather of the great King David, from whose family would come the Messiah, the one who would redeem all God's people, making them (and us!) whole.

Redemption

³ In ancient cultures, widowhood was greatly feared. Women simply had to be under the protection of men; a woman's social standing was derived entirely from her husband's. One of the remarkable features of ancient Judaism was God's insistence that his people care for widows and orphans. Even in Jesus' day, widows didn't have a much better lot; e.g., we meet Tabitha whose life was devoted to caring for widows (Acts 9:36-43). When Tabitha dies, the widows are devastated and terrified. Who will care for them? God will. Acting through Peter, God restores life to Tabitha.

The depth of the women's plight enables us to grasp that this is a story of redemption, particularly for Naomi, who returned home and called herself "bitter." In the eighty-five verses in the book, "redeem" or "redemption" is used twenty-three times. Reversal is the essence of redemption. It is slavery reversed into freedom. Death into life. Bitterness and fear into sweetness and courage.

Naomi desperately needed redemption. She found it through her daughter-in-law, Ruth, who left her own people and gods and headed for Bethlehem to a new home and a new God. After Ruth married Boaz and gave birth to a son, it is Naomi to whom the women in the village came, saying, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him" (4:14-15). It is not Ruth who redeemed Naomi, who reversed her life and provided the kinsman she desperately needed. It was God who was her redeemer.

When Naomi told her daughters-in-law to return to their homes rather than accompany her to Bethlehem, she said, "may the Lord show kindness to you . . ." The Hebrew word here is *hesed*, a much richer word than simply "kindness." Rather, *hesed* conveys an essential part of God's character, his kind mercy and abundant grace. To extend *hesed* was to extend a lovingkindness and mercy far beyond anything that could be expected. This was God's response to the women's crisis and it is God's response to each of us. God is our redeemer as well.

Women in the Ancient World

Sure, we all know that the ancient world was comprised of patriarchal cultures; i.e., the men were in charge. But we don't understand how women were seen by the men and perhaps by themselves. For a biblical example, read Exodus 20:17, where in the last of the Ten Commandments, women and slaves are lumped in with the house, the ox, the donkey, and anything that "belongs to your neighbor," i.e., property that is not to be coveted.

I once heard a lecture from a professor of ancient history on the role of women and slaves in Greco-Roman society. The title of the lecture was, "Women & Slaves: Less Than Human." An inspired title that drives home the truth about the status of women in the ancient world, even the supposedly "enlightened" world of the Greek philosophers. In the first centuries AD, many of the pseudo-Christian gnostics believed that women were an incomplete human, needing to pass upward through manhood on their way to heaven.

All this stands in stark contrast to Paul who wrote to the Galatians that, "There is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). And Paul put this unity to work in the many important responsibilities he gave women in the course of his ministry.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today's story is one of redemption, salvation, and reversal. It is the story of God working through the friendship of two desperate women. In what ways might our friends be the means of our own redemption – whether in the sense of helping us reverse life's difficulties or even to come to trust Jesus Christ? You might share some stories of how your friends have helped you through difficult times or how you might have done that for a close friend of yours.
2. So . . . do you see God at work in your own life? How? When? What are some specific examples of how God has brought good out of difficulty and pain? Could you see it at the time or only later? Did others help you to see God at work in your

life? How does this understanding of God's work in our lives help to shape and strengthen our extreme makeovers? Does it give us more confidence? Perhaps perseverance through difficulties? Perhaps hope?

3. In his book, *The Friendship Factor*, Alan McGinnis writes that loyalty and devotion (*hesed*) are essential to building a life-long friendship. When Ruth refuses to stay in Moab, insisting that she go to Israel with Naomi, Ruth is being loyal, not only to Naomi, but more importantly, to God. Their relationship endures the tough times. Realize that Ruth was neither legally required nor customarily expected to stay with her mother-in-law. How important do you think loyalty is to a friendship? What does it really mean to be a loyal friend? When do we know that the loyalty has become blind?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: The story of Naomi

Monday, Ruth 1: 1-5 Naomi loses her family.

Tuesday, Ruth 1:6-33 Naomi heads home.

Wednesday, Ruth 2 Naomi sends Ruth out to glean in Boaz's fields.

Thursday, Ruth 3 Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing floor.

Friday, Ruth 4:1-12 Boaz arranges the redemption.

Saturday, Ruth 4:13-22 Naomi is blessed with a new family and some extended blessings.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *The Truth About Angels*

Coming in October 2018: A cruise to Israel with Scott & Patti

For more information go to www.scottengle.org