Hi,

These warmer days are welcome, as April will be gone before we know it, or at least before we all emerge.

Here are today’s updates:

* **My Tuesday class on Genesis will be today at 11:45**. We will meet on [my Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/scottengle), of course.
* It has been suggested that **my next Sunday class be a Q&A**, which sounds like a splendid idea. It will help if you email me questions ahead of time or at least have them ready before we start class. It is a bit cumbersome working from the Facebook comments -- easy to miss some. Sunday at 12 noon -- on my Facebook page.
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org/).

Given that we miss seeing our friends in person, I thought we’d take a look at some of the friendship stories in the Bible. Here is the first, set during the time of the judges, more than a millennium before Jesus. You might set aside a half-hour or so this week and read the story of Ruth.

***Proverbs 17:17***

**A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity. [Like Coronavirus!]**

***Ruth 1:1-5, 15-18***

**In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.**

[After the deaths of her husband and both sons, Naomi decided to return to Israel, her home. Her daughters-in-law accompanied her for awhile. But Naomi told the women to stay in Moab, so Orpah turned around and headed home.]

**So she [Naomi] said [to Ruth], “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said,**

**“Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.**

In the coming days, we’ll be looking at the Bible’s teachings about friendship. You might think that this would mean looking at various biblical “principles.” But it does not. God doesn’t really teach us in that way. The Bible is largely a book of stories meant to be understood within the larger story of God’s work in this world. So, we’ll be looking at biblical stories of friends, considering how we can find ourselves in these stories and learn something about the true meaning of friendship.

*The story of Ruth and Naomi*

The story of Naomi (and it is Naomi’s story despite the name of the book) is about the power of God, working through Ruth’s faithful friendship, to redeem Naomi from bitterness and despair.

Naomi and her husband were living in Israel 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. Her sons married local women, Orpah and Ruth.

But ten years later, tragedy struck Naomi again. Now, Naomi’s sons were dead and the three 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.Naturally, Naomi decided to head back to Israel, hoping to find family and rebuild her life. Naomi was accompanied by her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But, taking pity on them, Naomi urged them to turn around and stay in Moab. 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, but only the beginning.

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 was in great need of 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.

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.

The words “redeem” or “redeemer” are used more 20 times in this brief story. Redemption refers to the process of restoring what has been lost or stolen or captured. In the ancient world, a kinsman-redeemer was one who recovered property or prestige that the family had lost.

One important portrait of God woven throughout the Bible is that of Holy Redeemer. The focus here is on *freedom*. God was Israel’s strong Redeemer, who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. In the story of Ruth and Naomi, Boaz is the kinsman-redeemer of Ruth. Ruth’s child will be the redeemer of Naomi. But we need to see God at work in this story. Ruth, and her friendship with Naomi, is God’s instrument used to accomplish Naomi’s redemption. For Israel, what God had done for Naomi, he would do for his people.

But even with the birth of the child, 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 (us!) whole.

*Unlikely friends*

One could hardly find two people less likely to be friends. Ruth and Naomi were from different lands. They worshipped different gods. They were separated in age by a generation. Yet touched by tragedy and by God’s grace, they found friendship, restoration, and renewal in each other and in God.

*A bit more: when did Ruth and Naomi live?*

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 OT 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.

*A movie recommendation*

Linda and Harold Walker recommended a movie that Patti and I watched over the weekend: *An Inspector Calls*. It was excellent. (also very preachable!) It is available on Amazon Prime and perhaps elsewhere. You’ll want to compare notes with someone afterwards.

*A book recommendation*

A few years back I read what was then a new novel by Robert McCammon (who wrote the best werewolf book ever, *The Wolf’s Hour*). His book went on to begin a new series. *Speaks the Nightbird* is an epic historical mystery about a young lawyer and a woman accused of witchcraft in the 17th century Carolinas. It will occupy you for a while, if you like that sort of thing . . . I do.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott