

New Vision

Minor League • Ruth and Naomi • Ruth 1:1-22 • 05/06/2018

Overview

Leaders, we are about to embark on a four week series on the book of Ruth. The characters of this book and interesting, encouraging, and challenging as God uses them over the course of four chapters.

As the group leader, we want you to have a more complete understanding of this book before we begin this series. The detailed commentary for chapter 1 is at the end of this document as usual. However, below is a brief recap on the nature and main theme of Ruth. This will be useful for you as you facilitate the conversation. Chapter 1 ends in bitterness, but as you will see, the book of Ruth is the reality of God as Redeemer.

Ruth is the story of a little foreign girl who came out of paganism and idolatry in the land of Moab. She came from a people who were in many senses an outcast people, and she came into a knowledge of the Lord God of Israel, as Boaz said, “Under whose wings thou art come to trust” (Ruth 2:12).

Ruth has only four brief chapters, but it is a mighty midget with a mighty message. In fact, it has several messages. The Book of Ruth is very important in connection with the coming of Jesus Christ into this world. Without this little book, we could not connect the house of David with the tribe of Judah. It is an important link in the chain of Scripture that begins with Genesis and goes right down to that stable in Bethlehem and to the Cross, to the crown, and to the throne of David on which our Lord will someday be seated. This is a very definite reason why Ruth is included in the canon of Scripture.

However, the primary purpose of the Book of Ruth is the presentation of an important phase in the doctrine of redemption. Redemption is possible only through a Kinsman–Redeemer (a Kinsman–Redeemer was a male relative who, according to various laws found in the Pentateuch, had the privilege or responsibility to act for a relative who was in trouble, danger, or need of vindication.) God could not redeem apart from a Mediator. Since only God could redeem, it was necessary for Him to become that person. Boaz furnishes the only figure for the Kinsman–Redeemer aspect of redemption which is so essential for any proper theory of the Atonement. This little Book of Ruth comes down to our level and tells the commonplace story of a couple who love each other. They were ordinary folk, average folk, and their love story is a mirror in which we can see the divine love of a Savior for you and me. As we proceed into the Book of Ruth, we see this wonderful love story unfold before us.[1]

Main Point

God is most powerfully present even when He seems to be most apparently absent.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Has there been a time when you have taken matters into your own hands? How did that work out for you?

Do you ever fear that your past experiences will keep you from serving God and ministering to others in the present? Why?

We have all experienced difficulties and afflictions in life and we are all faced with determining how those past experiences will affect us in the present. If anyone had reason to let their past hinder them, it was Naomi, however as we begin the story of Ruth, we will see how God continued to love Naomi in the face of her bitterness, redeemed her past, and secured her future.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ Deuteronomy 11:13-31 and Ruth 1:1-5.

Make a list of the events in these five verses. Who are the characters? Where are they from? Where did they go? What happened to them?

Why do you think Israel is experiencing this “famine?”

Why might Naomi’s situation be even more difficult than a similar situation would be for a woman today?

Because of a famine in Israel, the family was living on Moab. In the course of ten years, Naomi lost her husband and two sons. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law were now widows. In ancient Israel, however, women did not have the rights and opportunities that they have today. In Naomi’s time, when a woman lost her husband, it was the responsibility of the sons to provide for her. With both of her sons deceased, Naomi was in a terrifying predicament.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ Ruth 1:6-14.

After losing their husbands, Naomi tells her daughters-in-laws, Ruth and Orpah, to go back to their home. (vv. 8-9) Why do you think she did this?

Naomi said “the Lord ’s hand has turned against me” (v. 13). What does this reveal about her belief in God? Was she incorrect to believe that God was against her?

Naomi was correct in seeing God’s hand in the events that had transpired. First Samuel 2:6 says, “The Lord brings death and gives life; He sends some to Sheol, and He raises others up.” While God is sovereign over life and death, His allowance of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah to lose their husbands does not mean that He was against her.

The Bible has many scriptures (Job, Psalms) of men and women lamenting to God for the situations in which they find themselves.

What is a lament verses a complaint?

Is there a biblical way to mourn the losses we encounter?

Lament is not about suffering. Lament is not concerning suffering. Lament does not count the stages and try to identify the stage in which one finds oneself. Lament is the language of suffering, the voicing of suffering. Behind lament are tears over loss. Lament goes beyond the tears to voice the suffering. To voice suffering, one must name it- identify it. Sometimes that is difficult, even impossible. The memories are repressed so that the suffering is screened from view. Or one is aware of it, in a way, but in naming it, identifying it for what it is, would be too painful, too embarrassing. So one resists. Then, one cannot lament. One suffers without being able to lament. Lament is an achievement. Lament is more, though, than the voicing of suffering. The mere voicing of one’s suffering is complaint, not lament. Lament is a cry to God. This presupposes, of course, that lament is the action of a believer” (42-43)

| Have a volunteer read Ruth 1:15-18.

What did Ruth give up to go with Naomi to Bethlehem? Has anyone ever given up something significant in order to be committed to you?

How does Ruth’s statement in verses 16-17 mirror what happens when we receive and begin to follow Christ?

Naomi referred to Orpah and Ruth as her daughters three times in these verses. The affection Naomi felt for these women was very real. She came to love them and wanted what was best for them. Since Naomi had no other sons for them to marry, she encouraged them to return to their mothers so they might be cared for. While Orpah accepted this kindness, Ruth remained with Naomi and expressed belief and confidence in the God of Israel when Naomi appeared to have very little. Naomi believed that her lot in life was evidence of God’s judgment, but the rest of the story demonstrates that this was not the case. Ruth’s commitment to Naomi was more than a vow of friendship, but rather a decision that had far-reaching spiritual significance. Ruth was denying the idols of her Moabite background and clinging to the one true God.

| Have a volunteer read Ruth 1:19-22.

Verse 22 mentions that they came back at the beginning of the barley harvest. Why is this significant? How does this show God's amazing providence?

Did Elimelech's sin ultimately stop God from working in the lives of his family? How have you experienced this in your life?

Naomi and Ruth finally made it to Bethlehem. The people in town stirred because Naomi returned, but without her husband and sons. Instead, she brought a Moabite woman in their place. The names Naomi used for God reflected her belief that He was powerful and able to help her, but her tone showed that she didn't believe He would. The sin in Naomi's life caused her grief. However, the narrator of the story points out that they had returned at the time of harvest. The famine was over, and God was providing for the needs of His people as He always had. Naomi's bitterness kept her from seeing the providence of God. Despite her bitterness, God made provisions for Naomi, much like Christ who died for us while we were still sinners (see Rom. 5:8).

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Are we trusting our circumstances or the God who controls our circumstances?

Why should times of struggle be times to turn to God rather than away from Him?

When we are bitter, it is important to surround ourselves with people who will let us know how much God cares for us. Who are you willing to share your hurts with? Is there something you need to share now?

In what area of your life do you need to trust in God's providence? What is one step you can take this week to help you trust Him?

What are some practical ways we as a group might demonstrate our commitment to one another in times of difficulty?

Pray

As you close, thank God for His provision. Ask that even when our lives are difficult He would allow us to see His faithful love for us and protection over us. Pray for those around you who are struggling and thank God for His ultimate provision in Jesus Christ.

Commentary

1:1. During the time of the judges identifies the events of this story as taking place during a time when “everyone did whatever he wanted” (lit “what was right in his own eyes”), when “there was no king in Israel” (Judg. 21:25). During the time of the judges, a famine in the land probably would have been part of God’s judgment on His people for their apostasy from Him, pursuing the Baals and Ashtoreths (Judg. 2:11-15). This famine even affected Bethlehem, whose Hebrew name means “house of bread.” As a result, one family from that city did what was right in their own eyes and left the promised land, going to live in the pagan land of Moab, where economic prospects seemed brighter. Somewhere along the way, that temporary move turned into a permanent stay.

1:2. Elimelech means “My God is king,” which heightens the irony of his behavior in doing “whatever he wanted” because in those days “there was no king in Israel” (Judg. 21:25). His wife’s name, Naomi, means “Pleasant,” which evokes Ps. 16:6: “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” In contrast, she and her husband were dissatisfied with the boundary lines assigned them by God. The names of their sons, Mahlon and Chilion, seem related to words for sickness and mortality.

1:3-5. In the land of Moab, Naomi’s husband died and she was left with her two sons. The Hebrew verb left is related to the word remnant and often describes those who survive an outpouring of God’s wrath. Her sons then took Moabite women as their wives, contrary to the law that forbade marrying women from nations that served other gods (Deut. 7:3-4). Moabite women in particular had a reputation for leading Israelites astray after other gods (Num. 25). It must have seemed evident that the hand of the Lord was against Naomi in judgment.

1:6-9. Naomi had little choice but to leave Moab and return home, a move encouraged by the news that the Lord was providing food there. This points to repentance on the part of the Hebrews and their restoration. Naomi asked the Lord’s blessing upon her daughters-in-law in the form of His faithful love. This is a covenantal term that combines love and faithfulness, mercy and grace—all the positive aspects of committed relationship. It is a remarkable request that the Lord’s favor should be shown in this way to covenant outsiders like these foreign women. The women were sad to part. They wept loudly as they embraced.

1:10-14. Orpah and Ruth repeated their desire to return to Israel with Naomi. Once again, however, Naomi pressed them both to return, on the grounds that the best prospect of remarriage lay among their own people. Naomi assumed that no other family in Bethlehem would be interested in marrying Moabite women, and she emphasized the certainty of there being no other children from her own line. She was probably at least 50 years old at this time. Even if she were to have more children at once, by the time they grew up Orpah and Ruth would be too old to have children. Besides, Naomi argued, she was herself under a curse: the Lord’s

hand had turned against her. There is no hint of Naomi taking any personal responsibility or expressing repentance for her own actions in leaving the promised land. Convinced by Naomi's arguments, Orpah took her leave of Naomi, but Ruth clung to her—the same word used in Gen. 2:24 to describe the marriage bond.

1:15-18. The intensity of Naomi's attempts to dissuade her Moabite daughters-in-law from accompanying her back to Bethlehem suggests that she was not completely motivated by concern for their well-being. Their presence would have been a constant and embarrassing reminder of her tragic sojourn in Moab. Yet Ruth was not so easily dissuaded. In a crescendo of commitment, she bound herself to go with Naomi and to live with her. In fact, she would even die and be buried where Naomi was—the greatest possible commitment in the ancient world. She sealed her commitment with a self-imprecatory oath, taken in the personal name of Naomi's God, Yahweh. Naomi's response to this moving speech was remarkably curt. Literally, the Hebrew in verse 18 says, "She stopped talking to her."

1:19-22. The townswomen's question, Can this be Naomi? pointedly and deliberately ignored Ruth's presence. In response, Naomi urged them to rename her Mara since the Lord had made her bitter rather than "pleasant." It was at Marah that the Israelites found only bitter water to drink on their way out of Egypt, and so they grumbled against the Lord (Ex. 15:23-24). Naomi's heart was similarly turned against the Lord, yet the connection also raised hope that the Lord would heal her bitterness and bring her to a place of rest, just as He did for Israel. Naomi had returned physically to Bethlehem from Moab, but would she similarly return to the Lord in repentance?

"If God is Good and Sovereign, Why Lament?" by Nicholas Wolterstorff (published in Calvin Theological Journal 2001)

J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: History of Israel (Ruth)*, electronic ed., vol. 11 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), ix-x.