



Wednesday Bible Education
Biblical Theology
Lesson 9: Ruth

REVIEW

Questions from last week's lesson:

1. What is in the book of Judges?
2. How does Judges help us today?

Answers:

1. Judges tells the history of Israel after the death of their leader, Joshua. Israel tries to complete the conquest of Canaan, but fails to drive out all the inhabitant nations.

The judges are leaders who provide temporary deliverance for Israel from their enemies, the Canaanite nations who oppose them. These deliverances involve various unusual means. The left-handed Ehud kills the king of Moab, Eglon, with a concealed dagger. Shamgar kills 600 Philistines with an ox goad. Jael drives a tent peg through Sisera's head. Gideon destroys a Baal altar at night, puts out a fleece, and defeats the Midianites with a mere 300 men. The angel of the Lord appears to Manoah's wife, the birth of Samson, and all of Samson's exploits.

Judges describes the lack of leadership and authority in Israel. There was king in Israel in those days and every man simply did what was right in his own eyes. The sins of Israel were heaped up and Judges shows God's righteous wrath against sin and also the glory of his mercy and faithfulness to forgive and deliver his people.

2. Sin is not only a problem for Israel over three thousand years ago. Sin is universal from the fall of Adam to today. Understanding Judges should help us see the outcome of sin. Where does disobedience lead? It leads to the corruption we see in Israel as Judges gives us scenes of unthinkable societal corruption. We today cannot think we can walk contrary to God's word just as Israel did and escape judgment, which they did not

Judges certainly highlights the necessity of righteous authority, but the book also helps us see that righteous authority does not come from man. The book gives a certain political perspective. We can see that even if the "right" people are elected and appointed, and even if that leads to some betterment for the country, it will not be full and it will not last.

We can apply the message of Judges to ourselves because we can identify with Israel in

ways. Judges makes clear that Israel's problem is not out there among the nations, but it is within Israel. They needed a king to deliver them from themselves as much as from their enemies. In short, they need a Savior, and so do we.

INTRODUCTION

What is the book of Ruth about? Ruth tells the story of Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth. Naomi's family go to Moab because of famine in Israel. Her husband and her two sons die, leaving her and her daughters-in-law. Naomi returns to Israel and Ruth goes with her. Ruth meets Naomi's kinsman Boaz. Ruth and Boaz get married and live happily ever after. The book of Ruth is about the mercy and kindness of God in his providence to those who trust him, and his working in ordinary events of life to accomplish salvation for his people and fulfill his ultimate purpose for the universe he created.

This lesson covers the book of Ruth. We will consider the content and structure of the book, along with major themes and practical applications to modern readers. We will consider what Ruth reveals about Christ and his kingdom as it fits into the Bible's global story.

OBSERVATION

Ruth is the third book of history, but does not continue from the book of Judges, which is before it. Exodus through Judges all continue the story from the previous book, so Ruth breaks that cycle. Verse 1 of the book tells us the account takes place in the time period of the Judges, so it is concurrent with that book. Ruth tells of a famine in Israel, but Judges does not mention any famines. Setting the date for the book is not clear-cut, but considering the genealogy at the end of book, Ruth most likely takes place around Judges 10:3-5 and the minor judge Jair who had 30 sons and 30 cities.

Ruth is historical narrative covering about 12 years and focusing on two locations—Bethlehem and Moab. Naomi and her family are central to the book and it is named for Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth. Ruth is one of two Old Testament books named for women as the central figures in the book. It is the only Old Testament book named for a Gentile. It is also the only Old Testament book named for a direct ancestor of Jesus.

The book of Ruth follows a redemptive arc. The book begins low with a famine causing Elimelech to leave Bethlehem with his family to go to Moab, where there was food. Elimelech dies in Moab, leaving Naomi and their two sons. The situation gets worse after Naomi's sons marry Moabite women and then her sons die. Naomi is left in a foreign land outside Israel with no husband, no children, and no grandchildren. She has become the pitiable bereft widow. Naomi is added to the line of people in the Bible who seem to suffer disproportionately without cause, such as Joseph, Hannah, David, Job, etc.

With nothing else to do, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, where she expects to live off the mercy and charity established by the law for the care of the poor fatherless and

widows. One daughter-in-law remains in Moab and Ruth goes to Bethlehem with her. Ruth expresses the faith of a conversion and bears the fruit of it (1:16-18; 2:11-12). Ruth is also a childless widow and chooses a path of faith that doesn't seem promising.

Their return is timed to the beginning of the harvest (1:22). Ruth happens to go to the field of Boaz, who is a near kinsman with the resources and willingness to redeem Elimelech's land and family line. He shows special favor to Ruth and Naomi recognizes his interest. Naomi advises Ruth according to Mosaic law to request Boaz to perform the role of kinsman redeemer, including marrying Ruth.

Boaz gladly agrees and sets about meeting the legal obligations. He had to legally establish the claim and secure the refusal of one kinsman nearer than he was. All is arranged and Boaz marries Ruth.* The book ends with the birth of their son Obed, who would be the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David. The birth of the heir is the restoration of life to Naomi.

A brief outline of Ruth:

1. Chapter 1 Elimelech takes his family to Moab
2. Chapter 2 Naomi and Ruth in Bethlehem
3. Chapter 3 Ruth requests Boaz to play the kinsman redeemer
4. Chapter 4 Boaz and Ruth are married and have a son

INTERPRETATION

Ruth teaches the sovereignty of God in history, even in such small and ordinary circumstances. The characters of the book are not great and notable people. There are no miracles in Ruth. It is a very beautiful story, but quite mundane. There are about twenty references to God in the book. For example:

1. 1:6 Naomi attributes the ending of the famine to God.
2. 1:8-9 Naomi leaves her daughters-in-law to the kindness of God because she could do nothing for them.
3. 2:12 Boaz notes that Ruth is under the wings of the Lord, meaning protection and provision, and the same word is used for garment in 3:9.

* The question often comes up about whether Boaz had any other wives or children. Some see a possible allusion to his children in references to his workers in the field. This is possible, but seems a stretch. I'm unaware of anyone finding reference to a wife, living or dead. I think it is inconclusive, though the imagery of the story makes more sense if he is unmarried.

4. 4:13 God gave conception to Ruth and puts Ruth in line with other women whom God's kindness is highlighted in giving them children—Sarah, Leah, Rachel, Hannah, etc.
5. 4:14 Naomi is blessed by the women acknowledging the goodness of God in giving her a kinsman and heir to her husband.

God's hand is evidently throughout the book and the events of these people's lives. We sometimes call this providence. Naomi initially misinterprets God's providence in her life (1:13, 20-21). She came to better understanding by the end of the book.

The famine in the beginning of the book is the event that sets everything else in motion. It may seem to be barely there, but there is significance to a famine. Famine is one of the law curses for disobedience (Leviticus 26:26; Deuteronomy 28:17-18, 22-24). Restoration, recovery, and food are promised upon repentance (Deuteronomy 30:1-3, 8-10; 32:34). We can see that Elimelech should have led his family, clan, and tribe in repentance rather than leading them to Moab. Remember, this was the time of the judges. God's grace overabounded sin, but we are not to sin that grace may abound (Romans 5:20-21).

The book of Ruth gives us real world applications of the Mosaic law. Several laws give boundaries to the book.

1. The laws of gleaning (Leviticus 19:9; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19, 28)
2. The laws of inheritance (Numbers 36:7)
3. The laws of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5)
4. The laws of the kinsman redeemer (Leviticus 25:47-55; 27:9-25)

Ruth contributes to the expectation of the Messiah and his kingdom. The genealogy of David is an obvious connection. In Ruth, God has not forgotten his promise to Abraham in the midst of moral failure in Israel. This book provides an important bridge from the judges to kingship in Israel that is coming after it in 1 Samuel. Ruth sets the stage for the revelation of the Davidic King (2 Samuel 7:1-17; Isaiah 9:2-7; 11:1-10; Zechariah 9-14). Also, Ruth is a Gentile convert and is named in the lineage of Jesus (Matthew 1:5), so the book foreshadows the Gentile inclusion in the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant and Messianic kingdom.

APPLICATION

How does Ruth speak to modern readers? Understanding Ruth will help us understand the mercy and kindness of God in the midst of trials. We can easily relate to the ordinariness of life in the book. We can learn from Naomi not to judge God's ways too quickly, nor by only

what we can see. Ruth teaches us God is working and it will be for his glory and the good of all who trust in him as all his promises are fulfilled.

Understanding Ruth should help us see that God's laws are good and good for us. The mercy in God's law are evident in this book and save Naomi and Ruth. We tend to always think of law as negative restriction, but God's commandments are wise, good, and positive blessing. Think of the positive blessing of the Sabbath law as Jesus clarified, "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

Understanding Ruth helps us understand how we all stand on the same ground before God. We see his mercy is upon all who believe and trust him, no matter their nationality, ethnicity, status, sex, etc.

Ruth should help us be reminded to show kindness to others. Kindness runs thematically through the book—Naomi to Ruth, Ruth to Naomi, Boaz to Ruth and Naomi, and most importantly, God's kindness to them. Ruth reminds us to treat others with compassion and particularly those in most need of help.

CONCLUSION

Ruth recounts God's kindness and mercy in the lives of one Judaic family from Bethlehem. Boaz shows God's kindness to Ruth and Naomi, who are poor and vulnerable. God's purpose in bringing a Savior into the world is perpetuated through his providential acts in the daily lives and concerns of normal people.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This series is a study in biblical theology going book by book through the entire Bible. Each lesson typically covers one book of the Bible, though occasionally covers more than one book when the books are short. This PDF is provided for personal study, small group study, or use in a church class. Unless otherwise noted, all lessons have been prepared by Jeff Short, the pastor of Harmony Baptist Church.

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