

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 18. The Redeemer.

Psalm 112:4 says, "Even in darkness light dawns for the upright." The Book of Judges finished with the sad theme of Israel's religious and moral degeneracy, national disunity and the menace of surrounding nations. But we come now to the Book of Ruth which, though set in the same time and place, shines like a gem with the sheer beauty of its purity, selfless love and true devotion to God.

The message behind the book is of God as Israel's "redeemer;" there are over 20 occurrences of the word "to redeem" in some form. The book is outstanding in the Old Testament for its narrative skill - vivid descriptions, steady rise of dramatic suspense, portrayal of human interest situations and its clear message of the benefits to those who obey and worship God. In this intimate story of an ordinary Israelite family we have "a marvellous joining of man's actions with God's".¹

Chapter 1 begins with a famine which occurred at a time of peace between Israel and Moab. Elimelech sought relief for himself and his family by leaving his home in Bethlehem, crossing back over the Jordan River and skirting the Dead Sea to reach the large grain-producing uplands of Moab in the east.

At once we ask, should he have left the land God had given to Israel? Was he more concerned for his family's welfare than for his God-given heritage? Moab, not as aggressive as other neighbouring nations but still in great fear of Israel, had hired Balaam to curse them, and God had nullified the curse by turning it into a blessing. (Numbers 23-25.) Then Balaam used another weapon to weaken Israel – sex. (31:8,16) Seduced by Moabite women, the men of Israel began to join in the fertility rites of Baal, and God had to discipline them with a plague which took off 24,000 of them. To fraternise with the Moabites was going directly against God's instructions.

Maybe Elimelech was in despair over the degenerate state of his homeland and felt that the evil in Moab was no worse than the evil in Israel. But his action brought tragedy to the whole family. Until quite recently a type of malaria was indigenous to the region, which fell with heavy impact particularly on younger men. Whether Naomi had agreed with her husband's decision or not, she felt that God's judgement had fallen on her; she was left with nothing but 2 foreign daughters-in-law and no heirs to carry on the family line or support her in her old age.

But in this story we see that no situation is beyond the redeeming work of God. Still in Chapter 1 we get our first glimpse of the greatness of Ruth. Whatever she had seen in the mother-in-law who had steadfastly endured much heartache, had prompted her to seek to know the God of Israel and she resolved to worship Him whatever the cost. As a Moabitess she knew that the Hebrews hated her race and that in Bethlehem she would face rejection, loneliness and the loss of all her ties to home. And Naomi, aware of that, was unselfish enough to urge both girls to go back to their home in the hope of a second marriage and happiness. But Ruth had decided to leave Moab and its pagan ways behind; she was prepared to be loyal to Naomi, confident that her mother-in-law loved her as much as she loved Naomi. There are probably few oaths of loyalty that have touched us so much for their dramatic impact and genuine charm as the life-changing declaration made by Ruth to Naomi in chapter 1:16,17, culminating in the supreme promise that "your God will be my God." The rest of the book shows how God blessed her - and blessed the bereft Naomi - for her decision and her faithfulness.

That 2 women could make such a journey alone without any harm coming to them, was an unmistakeable sign that God was with them. Yet when the women of Bethlehem hardly recognized Naomi after the sorrows she had endured, she was quick to blame God – verse 20, "the Almighty has made my life very bitter.... The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." It is sad when the trials of life loom so large that they blind us to the blessings sent to soften the blows. God knows our frame and how much trouble we can stand; He does "temper the wind to the shorn lamb."

In Chapter 2 a new factor is introduced into the story. Among the humane laws given through Moses was the duty of a kinsman to protect the interests of needy members of the extended family. He was to act as a “redeemer”, to provide an heir to maintain the family line of a deceased brother, to avenge the killing of a family member, to redeem land sold outside the family and to redeem an impoverished relative who had been sold into slavery. Verse 1 introduces us to Boaz, a man of high standing in Bethlehem, wealthy, highly regarded by his fellow citizens and showing himself to be kind, considerate, generous and above all, a worshipper of God. And he was a relative, a member of the clan of Naomi’s husband Elimelech. The plot thickens!

Again and again in history we have to marvel at God’s perfect timing. The 2 women had arrived home just as the barley harvest was beginning; the wheat harvest followed that, so Ruth, courageously putting behind her the loneliness and strangeness she must have felt in a foreign land, suggested to Naomi that she glean the fields and thus provide some food for them both. Verse 3 has the pregnant phrase, “As it turned out” Ruth unknowingly found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz and at that very moment Boaz himself arrived and greeted his harvesters with a hearty “The Lord be with you!” The workers returned the greeting warmly.

Then Boaz, who obviously had a heart for his workers, asked the foreman who was the strange woman, and got a full account of Ruth and her request to glean there. Boaz, who had heard the gossip about Naomi’s return home, rose to the occasion and in verses 8 and 9, made Ruth welcome and extended to her privileges not normally extended to gleaners. Ruth’s reply, humble but not grovelling, brought a compliment from Boaz and in verse 14, a further privilege in the supply of lunch. Boaz went further, with instructions to his workers for her protection and some extra help, so that Ruth went home loaded with about 22 litres of barley plus leftovers from her lunch which would do them both for dinner!

Boaz could have rejected Ruth as a foreigner. Instead he welcomed her into the family of Israel with grace, verse 12 – “May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” Oh that all churches would be as welcoming to “outsiders” who do not fit the specifications of orthodox Christians! As a young man Mahatma Ghandi was discouraged in his search for God by an honoured member of the church.

Verses 19-23 tell how Naomi’s spirits lifted when she heard the good news; now she could praise God - “He has not stopped showing His kindness to the living and the dead.” It was then she decided to tell Ruth about the kinsman-redeemer implications as her mind went into overdrive. In Chapter 3 the idea takes shape. Harvesting was drawing to a close, which meant there would be no further work for Ruth until the olives and grapes were harvested. It was time for Naomi to exercise her responsibility as a mother-in-law to the fatherless Ruth, and so she plans to involve Boaz, as a redeeming relative, in at least one aspect of his legal duties.

As the barley or wheat were cut, they would be tied into sheaves and transported to a threshing floor where the grain would be separated from the stalks by a threshing sledge or the hooves of cattle or the wheels of carts. Winnowing would be done by tossing the grain into the air with winnowing forks so that the wind would blow away the straw and chaff. The conclusion of a successful harvest was the occasion for merry-making in the evenings and then the workers would sleep in their cloaks at the threshing floor to prevent marauders from stealing the grain.

Naomi admits her scheme to Ruth and includes some woman’s wiles – verse 3, “Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes” to enhance her plan. There was nothing immoral in what she told Ruth to do. In that culture it was an accepted request for marriage, and Boaz was the ideal “eligible!” Whatever her feelings were, Ruth complied willingly and in verses 7-15 Boaz showed in his hearty reaction his noble and protective nature. He praised her for choosing him instead of one of the younger men and to avoid scandal for them both he urged her to go home before she could be discovered. He loaded her with a shawlful of barley with the sound advice, “Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.” Naomi of course was delighted at the turn of events and assured Ruth she would only have to bide her time a little longer.

In Chapter 4 we see that Boaz, having been awakened to his responsibilities, lost no time in starting negotiations. There was a fly in the ointment in the person of one closer kinsman who had to be given the first opportunity of doing the honours. The “town gate” was like our town hall, the normal place for business and legal transactions, and witnesses were always readily available. The other kinsman was there and at first he was willing to redeem Naomi’s property but not, we see with relief, at the cost of having to marry Ruth! It could ruin his own estate in the event of Ruth having a son whose heritage would belong to Elimelech’s clan – not to mention the disturbance in his family relationships with 2 women added to his household!

But apparently such difficulties did not concern Boaz and we trust it was with a sigh of relief that he now agreed to marry Ruth. He seems to have been much older than she; his name for her was “daughter”, and we don’t know how much romantic love existed between them. But we do know they had a sound basis for a good marriage – mutual respect, unselfishness, consideration and above all, a mutual love for God. And I think that our loving God gave them happiness as well!

Verses 11 and 12 show the marriage was approved by all and sundry with loads of good wishes and blessings. In process of time Ruth bore a son to a welcome of more good wishes, prayers and praises to God from the local ladies. It is significant that Ruth was a Gentile - and that Boaz was descended from Rahab, another Gentile. God loved His chosen race, the Israelites, but nowhere does it say that He did not love the Gentiles too.

In verse 16 Naomi “took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him.” This indicates that Naomi adopted the child as her own, so that whatever investment Boaz made to his upbringing would benefit not himself, but the family of Elimelech. It was the ultimate sacrifice of a Godly man.

Boaz as the kinsman-redeemer is more than an example for us; his actions point to the selfless love of our Great Redeemer, Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself up to redeem us from our want and give us the inheritance of His wealth. So it is fitting that Ruth’s baby son, Obed, should have a son, Jesse, who had a son, David. For David had a Son Who was greater than them all, none other than Jesus Christ.

¹NIV Study Bible 1985, Zondervan Corporation