

Ruth

Slide 1 - Over the last few weeks the church has been doing a series on couples in the Bible and thinking about how these stories fit into the big story of God, asking the question, why are these stories in the Bible. Today we are going to look at the story of Ruth and Boaz – which is actually the story of a couple, and a mother-in-law, Naomi. **Slide 2** Mother-in-laws get such a bad rap in stories, don't they? But when Boaz marries Ruth, he gets Naomi too and she is actually an important part of this story.

Slide 3 - This story is found in the book of Ruth, which is a very small book in the OT, slotted in between Judges and 1 Samuel - very easy to miss when you are flicking through the pages of your Bible. It only has four chapters and a total of 85 verses. The books on either side of it are history books. Judges documents the time in Israel's history, when the Hebrews live in the Promised Land, in Israel, after the death of Joshua. It shows a repeated cycle - the Israelites forget about God and do what is right in their own eyes. They are invaded by enemies, they cry out to God for help and God raises up a Judge who leads the people and helps deliver them from their enemies. Things would be good for a while and then the people would forget and the cycle would start again. And this is repeated over and over again. Samuel is the last Judge, and the books that follow Ruth document the history of the Kings in Israel... and again it is a very checkered history, with some good Kings and lots of bad ones. Ruth opens with the line, 'In the days of the Judges...' so we know this is the time that the story takes place... but sandwiched in the middle of these very serious historical records we get a very different type of story.

Ruth is a story, not about judges and kings and important leaders and battles between warring nations – these things are not even mentioned... it is a story about a family, a fairly ordinary family and we glimpse in this story what life was like in a small Jewish town, where the people lived on the land. We see the struggles they had and how precarious life could be and we see how a community like this dealt with their problems... and the most remarkable part of the story is that two of the three main characters are women. Ancient Israel was a patriarchal society. Men were in charge of public life and this wasn't to say that women were totally powerless because they were influential within the domestic life of their families, but when we look at history they are largely invisible – men controlled politics and

men wrote history. But in this story we not only see women, we hear women. This story reveals the concerns and the words of women, so much so that some historians have suggested this book may even have been written by a woman. We actually don't know who wrote Ruth but whoever it was has given us a rare insight into the lives of working class ordinary Jewish women at this time.

So we are going to have a look at this story... the story of Ruth and Boaz and Naomi— and then we are going to consider that important question, why is this story, which is so different from what surrounds it, in the Bible?

Slide 4 - The book of Ruth opens with a famine in Israel and Elimelech decides to take his family, his wife Naomi and their two sons, from their home in Bethlehem to the neighbouring land of Moab. Elimelech dies, their sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, and then they die. Naomi is left without her husband and any sons. The grief alone would have been terrible but she was also left without a man to look after her. In the ancient world this was a disaster. A widow in this time was extremely vulnerable and Naomi even more so because she was in a foreign land. She had no man to support and protect her, no money, no legal standing, no extended family to provide for her - she was absolutely powerless. The Bible has a lot to say about widows, because they represented those who needed help and compassion. They were vulnerable and Naomi would have been desperate, so when she hears that the famine in Israel is over she decides to go home. Her daughters-in law both start to go with her, but Naomi tells them to go home – she has nothing to offer them, not even another son for them to marry. Jewish law stated that if a man died before having any children, his brother was to marry his widow. The firstborn son of this marriage would be the heir of the dead man and carry on his name and inherit any property. Naomi has no more sons to give to Ruth and Orpah and she is old. Orpah leaves but Ruth refuses to go and we have this very well known passage as Ruth dedicates herself to Naomi: 'where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.' Ruth is loyal. They return to Bethlehem, where Naomi declares, 'the lord almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me; the almighty has brought misfortune upon me.' Naomi is empty, she has lost everything and she blames God.

But there is a sign that things are about to change... the end of chapter one tells us the harvest is about to begin.

Slide 5: But when Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem they are still poor. We know this because Ruth has to go to the fields to pick up left over grain. This was another provision for the poor in Jewish law. Deut 24:19 says, 'when you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back and get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.' Ruth represents all of these, she was an alien and a widow, poor and vulnerable. And it just so happens that she gathers the grain in a field belonging to Boaz, who was a relative of Naomi's dead husband. Co-incidence? Or not? Boaz notices her, 'whose young woman is this' he asks (not who is she, but whose is she... reflecting the culture of the time!) He has heard about her kindness and loyalty to Naomi and he offers her protection by telling the other men not to touch her (this shows us how unsafe it was for single women), and he ensures she has enough food by ordering his men to leave behind extra grain for her to gather. He instructs his men not to embarrass her - he is concerned for her emotional well-being too. Boaz is a good guy... he goes above and beyond the expectations and requirements of the law to help out Ruth. Maybe he just fancies her... but the reason he gives is because she has blessed Naomi and he prays a blessing upon her, '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.' He is a godly man, who doesn't just speak godly words but follows it up with action... and becomes the instrument of the blessing he prays over Ruth.

Naomi is excited when Ruth returns home and reports to her about Boaz' attention and she calls him 'one of our kinsman-redeemers.' This refers to another provision in Jewish law to make sure the vulnerable were looked after. A kinsman redeemer was a member of the extended family who would make sure land did not pass out of family ownership. They would buy the land of dead or poor family members so it stayed in the family. Naomi is hopeful that Boaz will do this for her and Ruth, by buying Elimelech's land. However she is hoping for more than this. She is hopeful Boaz will also marry Ruth and provide an heir. She is hopeful Boaz will fulfil two laws, the law regarding the redemption of the land and the law about marrying a childless widow even though Boaz is not a brother in law, so wasn't legally

obligated to do this. We can see here that women were very reliant on men but that doesn't mean they are passive... and so Naomi hatches a plan.

Slide 6: Here is what she tells Ruth to do... to wash, to put on perfume and dress up in her best clothes. Apparently in the Hebrew the language in this passage is full of sexual innuendo. Let us not pretend that Naomi and Ruth are demure and innocent here - this is a passage about seduction. Ruth waits until Boaz goes to sleep on the threshing floor....and then.... she uncovers his feet and lies down. What is that about? Apparently this is suggestive of the position of a wife. Boaz wakes up in the middle of the night, sees someone lying at his feet, asks 'who are you?' Ruth replies; 'I am your servant Ruth. Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are my kinsman redeemer.' How romantic! What is Ruth doing? Ruth is proposing. Her request to spread the corner of the garment over her is saying will you marry you? Within her culture Ruth is taking the initiative to ensure her and her mother-in-law will be looked after.

Boaz is flattered and definitely interested, but he is an honourable man and he knows there is a closer relative who could fulfil the role of redeemer.

Slide 7 - So Boaz does what only a male could do... organises a public meeting, with witnesses, to sort out the issue of who was going to redeem the land and marry Ruth. He asks the other relative if he wants to be the kinsman redeemer. He declines leaving Boaz free to take Ruth to be his wife. Naomi's plan worked – they would be protected and provided for. The story ends with Ruth giving birth to a son, Obed, who would be the heir of Naomi's dead son.

Even though I am supposed to be talking to you about the couple Ruth and Boaz, this story starts and ends with Naomi because this is really her story. Who is it the women of the town praise? Not Ruth but Naomi. They say to her, regarding her grandson, 'Praise be to the lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel. He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter in law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.' Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, 'Naomi has a son.' And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.'

Even though the emphasis is on sons and fathers here, the voices are women's and they express the joy of Naomi at being saved, of being loved by a daughter who is better than seven sons... this is not something a man of this day would say!

Naomi has gone from emptiness at the end of chapter one back to fullness, with the birth of Obed she has been restored as a mother and to her place in the community. She has gone from being angry at God to praising him for his goodness and provision.

Slide 8 - Why is this story in the Bible? Why has God given us this glimpse into the private life of this Israelite family?

Boaz and Ruth are often held up as models of good character, both of them show loyalty and kindness and love – both do the right thing. But I really think there must be more to this story than an example of good behaviour. God must have included this in his big story because it shows us something about him and his bigger story.

Yes, Ruth and Boaz act out of love but we also see that God is acting in this story too. He stays in the background... he doesn't directly speak in this book – there are no prophets, priests or supernatural signs - but he is behind the scenes, looking after people even if that person is a foreigner, like Ruth. We see this in God's laws which are put into practise in this book as they were intended, to provide for the vulnerable. We are shown that God's plan actually works – and this family illustrates this better than those in the surrounding books who 'do what is right in their own eyes.' In chapter one we see that it is God who comes to the aid of his people in Israel by stopping the famine that causes Naomi's family to go to Moab in the first place. We see in chapter two, Naomi ends up in Boaz's field. The implication here is that God has made this happen and when they marry the text says it is the lord who enabled Ruth to conceive. And their son is the grandfather of King David who will play a significant role in God's plan for the world. Yes, Ruth and Boaz are godly people worthy of emulation, but the love they show and the way they look after others is a reflection of God and his love and his provision. **Slide 9** I said before that Naomi's plan to marry Ruth and Boaz worked, but it was really God's plan. God works with people to achieve his plan and his purposes in the world. **Slide 10**

But there is more than this. In the story of Ruth and Boaz there are two elements that are repeated and reinforced many times. These are that Ruth is a foreigner - she is called Ruth

the Moabite many times. The author wants you to remember that Ruth is not Jewish. And secondly the concept of Boaz as a kinsman-redeemer. The word redeemer is mentioned 13 times. The author wants you to be very aware that Boaz is going to pay the price, to buy the land, to marry Ruth and save her and Naomi.

In addition to this, the story ends with a genealogy, showing several generations leading up to King David. This placement was unusual for a genealogy - usually these come at the beginning of a story, to set the scene for what is to come. In Ruth the genealogy is at the end, because the author wants us to think about the future, to think about what comes next after this story. An OT Jewish audience would have seen this story as foreshadowing King David, who would redeem Israel and bring the nation to a place of security and wealth. But we see this story through the lens of Jesus, also a descendent of David, who would redeem the whole world. **Slide 11** This story reinforces the key theme of the whole of God's story – God's desire to redeem his people, to save them, to pay the price for them, to claim every one of every nation, men and women, as his own. And he does this at the cross. Naomi's journey from emptiness and despair, to redemption and fullness, is humanity's story, it's our story, it's God's story and it's a story that finds its fulfilment in Jesus.

And this is why this story of this family is in the big story of God...

Prayer