

Message #9
Ruth

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RUTH AND THE HOPE OF GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE
RUTH 4:13-22

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Robert Robinson was born in 1735 in England. His father died when Robert was only five years old. So at age 14 Robert went to work in London as an apprentice to a barber in order to help provide for his family. He had enough education along the way that he could read and write decently. At age 20 he went to hear the famous evangelist George Whitefield. His message of the gospel haunted him, and two years later he became a follower of Jesus. He began to do some writing and preaching about Jesus.

I have not been able to find the following incident in primary sources, but it is widely told. We do know with certainty that he struggled with mental health issues at certain points in his life. Supposedly when Robert was still a young man he went through a bout of depression. One Sunday he found himself on the streets of London. He hailed a horse-drawn cab. There was already a woman in the carriage, and she asked if he would like a ride to church. He was going to decline the offer. He had been away from church for several years. But he accepted the offer.

As they exchanged names, she expressed surprise in that she recognized the name Robert Robinson. She pulled out a small book of poems from her purse and asked if he was the author of a poem she had recently read. He replied in the affirmative, and she began to read, **"Come, Thou fount of every blessing,/ Tune my heart to sing Thy grace/ Streams of mercy, never ceasing,/ Call for songs of loudest praise."** His eyes skipped to the bottom of the page, and he recited the words: **"Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it---/ Prone to leave the God I love;/ Here's my heart, O take and seal it, Seal it for Thy courts above."** Supposedly this incident prompted Robert Robinson to get back on track with the Lord. A couple of years later the words were set to the music with which most of us have become familiar. Eventually he became pastor of a Baptist church that grew to include over a thousand parishioners.

We humans are indeed prone to wander. That is the story of the Book of Ruth and the Melech family. In the face of famine they left the Promised Land and went over to Moab on the east side of the Dead Sea. The sons in the family were married off to pagan women. No children resulted from these unions. Then all three men in the family died. The matriarch Naomi was left as a bitter woman. But in the midst of this tragic situation there was hope. That hope comes to fruition at the close of the book.

I.

In vv. 13 & 15 of Ruth #4 (p. 224) we learn about RUTH AND HOPE FOR THE OUTCASTS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. RUTH AND HOPE FOR THE OUTCASTS) Ruth was the Moabite who married into the Melech family. In spite of her own sadness and the bitterness of her mother-in-law she chose to follow Ruth back to her hometown of

Bethlehem. There she providentially was involved in gleaning in the field of a godly man who turned out to be a relative of Naomi. Naomi talked Ruth into getting herself in a situation where she proposed marriage to Boaz. He said yes. Last week Pastor Steve explained how Boaz went about dealing with the legal problems that were involved in that proposal. There was a closer relative who had first rights to the estate of Naomi and to marriage with Ruth. That relative gave up his right to Boaz. Thus Boaz became the redeemer, the *go'el*, who also married Ruth.

Thus we read in v. 13, **“So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son.”** There was a multitude of factors that worked against Ruth ever having any historical significance. She was a woman living in a patriarchal culture. She was a Gentile. Worse than that, she was a Moabite. (BETHLEHEM TO MOAB MAP) The Moabites were historical enemies of the Hebrews. The Law of Moses warned the Hebrews about getting involved with the Moabites. In Deuteronomy #23:3 (DEUTERONOMY 23:3) Moses warned his people, **“No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever...”** The primary issue was that Moabites and Ammonites worshiped false gods and had worship practices which included child sacrifice.

Yet Ruth ended up in the land of Israel, and she became a worshiper of YHWH, the God of Israel. Still she was a foreigner and a woman. She described herself as the lowest class of servant. (PROJECTOR OFF) She had no money, no power, no social standing. She had been unable to bear children. She was a widow. She was something of an outcast.

Yet she became a woman of *chayil*, a woman of character and strength. She was faithful to her mother-in-law, and she trusted God. She was now united with Boaz, a man of *chayil*, a man of strength and influence and character. In ten years of an earlier marriage she had borne no children. But now she has a son.

Only twice in the Book of Ruth is reference made to the direct intervention of God. One reference is here in the divine involvement in the production of a son. The other is in #1 v. 6 where the Lord is said to have visited His people and given them food.

In v. 15 the women describe this seeming outcast as better than seven sons. Seven in the Old Testament was a number of completion. In this patriarchal culture sons were preferred over women. In much of the world that is still the case. In China and India and some other parts of the world abortions are done to kill baby girls so that families can have sons rather than daughters. It is fascinating to me that this does not seem to bother the feminists of our world.

The encouragement to us is that God has this tendency to favor the outcasts of the world. In Biblical history He tends to choose the down-and-outers. Abraham was one of these seeming outcasts. In Deuteronomy #7 v. 7 (DEUTERONOMY 7:7) Moses tells his people, **“It was not because you were more in number than any other people that**

the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples...”

Jacob was the youngest twin who became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. David was the youngest son in a large family. (PROJECTOR OFF) It was he whom God enabled to defeat the giant Goliath and to become the king of Israel. Jesus was born of teen aged parents from the sticks of Galilee. He picked twelve unlikely men to be His apostles. They included fishermen and a tax collector. Such are the ways of God.

Paul told his Christian audience in 1 Corinthians #1 vv. 26 & 27 (1 CORINTHIANS 1:26), **“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (1 CORINTHIANS 1:27) But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...”** The story of Ruth reminds us that there is hope for the outcasts of the world.

II.

In vv. 14-17 we learn about NAOMI AND HOPE FOR THE WAYWARD. (II. NAOMI AND HOPE FOR THE WAYWARD) According to v. 14, **“Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel!’”**

Naomi and her family violated God’s directions to stay in the land of Israel. They moved to Moab, where the sons married Moabite women, contrary to God’s revealed will. As a result they produced no children. Then all the men died.

The news came that God had brought rain and a restored economy to Bethlehem. Naomi returned with Ruth. In #1 v. 19 the same expression “the women” is used. These women are appalled at Naomi. She has come back empty, and Naomi is bitter toward God. Naomi is perhaps a picture of Israel as a whole. During this time, and for much of Israel’s history, the people have been bitter toward God while also hoping for a redeemer.

Now the women praise God for what has happened to her. She has a redeemer, a *go’el*. He will carry on the name of her husband Elimelech. The women pray that he will become famous in Israel. Our discussion of this baby today witnesses to the fact that he has become famous beyond Israel to the entire world.

In v. 15 they proclaim, **“He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.”** This bitter woman has been revived by the birth of a grandson. She is confident that he will see to her care in her old age. Her decision to return to the land of promise has put her in a place that has led to divine blessing. The commitment of Ruth to Naomi has played a key part in this renewal.

Verse 16: **“Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse.”** The picture we get is that these ladies bring the new baby to Naomi, who seems to be living nearby. She becomes a caregiver for him. She is not what we might think of as a nurse. She is more like a nanny, or simply a grandmother who is involved in the care of her grandson.

Naomi’s hope for kids had largely died with the death of her husband and two sons. But that hope has been restored by the union of her daughter-in-law Ruth with her husband’s relative Boaz. The future looks brighter. It was a sad and painful and tragic path which had brought her to this point. But the right decision to return to Israel and the providential care of God has brought her to much of what she wanted.

We read in v. 17, **“And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”** “Obed” means “servant.” This is the only example in the Bible of people who are not parents who name a child. Perhaps they are just affirming the name which Boaz and Ruth have given him.

We then find out the big picture significance of this son. He becomes the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of King David. Thus Naomi and Ruth play key roles in God’s big picture. This wayward woman finds hope and usefulness at the end of her life. The lesson is that there is hope for the wayward.

Rosaria Butterfield (ROSARIA BUTTER FIELD) grew up in an Italian-Catholic family. She went to Catholic schools and was academically successful. She also enjoyed sports. She participated in ballet, gymnastics, and running. After high school she went off to Moab, to the land of secular college studies, where she pursued a degree in English.

Rosaria became involved with the feminist movement. She had boy friends in high school. But that interest changed in college. She later said, **“In some ways, my appreciation for an advocacy of feminist values, and just a deeper resonating interest in my female friendships began. ... I started to realize that for heterosexual women, it is a meat market out there, and I hated it! ... So in some ways my sort of homo-social life... sort of morphed into homosexuality in a fairly seamless way. It wasn’t a big event.”** (*Risen Magazine*, Summer, 2013)

By age 28 in graduate school she came out as a lesbian. She earned a Ph.D. in English from Ohio State University. She then served in the English department and women’s studies program at Syracuse University from 1992 to 2002. She became a tenured professor there. Her primary field of study was critical theory, specializing in queer studies. She advised the LGBTQ+ student group, wrote Syracuse University’s policy for same-sex couples, and actively lobbied for LGBTQ+ goals along with her lesbian partner.

In 1997 Rosaria began researching the Religious Right. She wrote an article about the Promise Keepers group which prompted a response from a pastor. He wrote her a kind and compassionate letter, which got her attention. He became a kind of *go'el*, a redeemer for her. She finally contacted him, and he invited her to his home for dinner with him and his wife. That began a series of meetings and a study of the Bible. God's Spirit began to work on her. She eventually showed up at Ken Smith's church in Syracuse. This interaction with Bible and church and pastor led to what Rosaria describes as her "train wreck conversion." She wrote about it in her book *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith*. Today she is the wife of a pastor in North Carolina. Naomi and Rosaria show us that there is hope in God for the wayward.

III.

In vv. 18-22 we come to BOAZ AND HOPE FOR THE FAITHFUL. (III. BOAZ AND HOPE FOR THE FAITHFUL) Boaz is the third main character in this book. He shows up on the scene in #2 as the owner of the field where Ruth happens to glean. Whereas the Melech family fled Bethlehem to escape the famine, Boaz trusted God and stayed around. He was somehow blessed with wealth. In the midst of a culture which is described as "everyone did what was right in his own eyes," Boaz proves to be a man of virtue and character. He is a man of *chayil*, which word suggests the idea of strength, influence, wealth, and perhaps military service.

His future wife Ruth is also described as a woman of *chayil*. We saw from a look at Proverbs #31 that a woman of *chayil* is presented there as a committed wife, a faithful mother, a hard worker, a person who reaches out to the poor, and a woman of respect in the community.

Now in vv. 18-22 we find out how Boaz fits in to the line of promise concerning the future king of Israel: **"Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, 19 Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, 20 Amminadab fathered Nahshon [Nahshon was a contemporary of Moses], Nahshon fathered Salmon, 21 Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, 22 Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David."**

We have ten generations listed here. There are five generations which precede the time of Moses. There are five generations between Moses and David. There are apparently gaps in this list. Biblical genealogies sometimes have these gaps. That does not mean that the Bible is in error. The Hebrew understanding was that grandparents and great grandparents could be called fathers of grandchildren and great grandchildren. Biblical genealogies sometimes are rounded off. Sometimes they include only the better known descendants and ancestors on the family tree.

The key thing which we find here is that Boaz appears in this line which comes from Judah and Perez and extends down to David. The Messiah will eventually descend from David. During his lifetime Boaz never had a clue that he would play this kind of role in God's sovereign plan. He may have been wealthy and well known in his community. But

Bethlehem was a small town of seemingly little national significance. Boaz was simply faithful and did the right things.

In this there is hope and promise for us. Our responsibility is to be faithful to God. We never know how God will use us. As is the case with Boaz, the results of our faithfulness may never be known on this side of the grave.

Peggy Randle was a regular attender here in the last year and a half. She was a Christian lady. She was also a navy veteran. She was forced to give up her career because her husband was also a navy corpsman. Back in her day the navy did not allow husbands and wives to serve together. So Peggy had to leave the military. But she took her status as a veteran very seriously.

Most of us did not know the extent of her commitment until we attended her funeral a few weeks ago. In the course of the service her many ways of service to veterans were recounted. Yet Peggy seemed not to realize the impact of her service. A few weeks before her passing I had an extended conversation with her at our last pot luck lunch. She talked a little about her involvement with veterans. One of the things which she did regularly was to show up at the Veterans' Cemetery on Thursdays when veterans who had few if any friends or relatives were buried. She wanted to make sure that they were honored and remembered.

Peggy with all seriousness told me that she wasn't sure if anyone would show up for her burial service. The reality was that lots of people showed up for her service, many of them veterans. The police chief from Mesa, Arizona, drove all the way here to attend. He described what an impact Peggy had on his life. The state director of veterans' affairs flew down from Carson City to talk about the impact which Peggy had on the lives of veterans. The previous director of veterans' affairs was also here. Others described the impact which her faithful service had upon them.

The encouragement for all of us is that our faithful service, especially for the Lord, is not forgotten. We just may never know the impact which our lives have until after we are dead and buried.

IV.

The fourth thing which we need to consider is YHWH AND HOPE PROVIDED BY HIS PROVIDENTIAL CARE. (IV. YHWH AND HOPE PROVIDED...) YHWH is the proper name of God used in the Old Testament.

The providential care of God is a primary theme of the Book of Ruth. God's direct intervention is mentioned only twice in the book. But His sovereign work is evident throughout the story. It is evident in the punishment of the Melech family for their waywardness. The narrator gives us straight reporting. But in looking at the directions of God in the Law of Moses and His earlier instructions it is evident that the Hebrews were supposed to stay in the Promised Land. They also were not supposed to intermarry with the Moabites. Death and childlessness were the punishments promised in the Mosaic

Law for this kind of waywardness. Such were the tragedies which the Melech family experienced.

Yet God was also gracious in His dealings. He brought rain and productivity back to the territory of Judah. He saw to it that news of this reached Naomi. God somehow worked in Ruth to convince this Moabite woman to go with her mother-in-law to Israel. This was in spite of all of the challenges that would come from living in a foreign land. This was in spite of Naomi's effort to try to convince Ruth not to come. This was in spite of the bitterness which Naomi had toward God.

Then in Bethlehem Ruth providentially ended up gleaning in a field owned by a kind and virtuous man. This was in spite of the fact that most people were living selfish, immoral lives. Not only was Boaz a kind and virtuous man, but he was also a relative of Elimelech. When marriage became a possibility, the Lord providentially--- and with the wise involvement of Boaz--- saw to it that a nearer relative bowed out of contention for being a redeemer for the family of Naomi. Then providentially Ruth, who had been unable to bear a child for ten years, had a son. He providentially becomes the redeemer, the *go'el* for Naomi. Through him the name of Elimelech is kept alive, and his estate is passed on. Providentially this son would turn out to be in the line of ancestry which would lead to David and eventually Jesus.

The genealogy in our passage begins with Perez. Matthew #1 in the New Testament gives us a bit more detail about this family tree. (MATTHEW 1:3) Verse 1 of Matthew #1 provides this information: **"...and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram..."** There is a reminder here of the story of the birth of Perez, which is described in some detail in Genesis #38.

In that chapter we are told that this son of Jacob moved away from his brothers and married a Canaanite. Abraham's descendants were not supposed to marry Canaanites. Judah's wife has three sons. Two of them die. Judah's daughter-in-law does not produce any children. Any of this sound familiar? Judah refuses to give his third son to Tamar the daughter-in-law. So she pretends to be a prostitute and has sex directly with Judah. The result of this is a pregnancy which produces twins, the youngest of whom is Perez, who heads up this genealogy list. Providentially Judah's Canaanite wife is kept out of the line of descent. The result of this seemingly unholy alliance ends up in the promised line of David and the Messiah.

In Matthew #1 v. 5 (MATTHEW 1:5) we have more information provided by this version of the genealogy. There we read, **"... and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse..."** What is the new thing that we discover here? The mother of Boaz is Rahab. Do you remember her? Now I suspect that there are intervening generations which are skipped over here. It was regarded as perfectly legitimate to do this in Hebrew genealogies. Indeed this was done in other genealogies in other countries in the Ancient Near East. The point which the author is making is that Rahab was an ancestor of Boaz and a part of the line of promise.

Rahab in Joshua #2 is described as a prostitute. She was the one who protected the two spies who were sent out by Moses to check out the city of Jericho when the Hebrews entered the Promised Land. News of their presence in Jericho got out, and Rahab hid them. When the Hebrews conquered Jericho, Rahab and her family were spared. We find out here that she not only married a Hebrew, but she also married into the line of promise. Thus we have two women in that genealogy who are described as prostitutes. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The entire genealogy of David and Jesus includes women and Gentiles and small town people and youngest sons and commoners and people who were not such great characters. We might expect that most families would want to sanitize their family tree. But the Bible gives us the straight stuff. Out of this line of outcasts and commoners and misfits and sinners eventually comes Jesus Christ.

And in this there is a certain encouragement for all of us. We are all sinners. We have things which we have messed up in our lives. We have screwed-up family backgrounds. Yet God's gracious, providential care enters into the picture. He can use us in spite of ourselves. Our responsibility is to be faithful. In that faithfulness in whatever ways that may seem small to us great purposes may yet be accomplished. We may never know until we get to heaven what impact that faithfulness may have.