

Ruth 1.6-2.23 Sermon

Introduction

† **[Slide 1: Bethlehem]** Pray

- † This is a picture of Bethlehem today, taken from a nearby ridge. Usually Bethlehem is safe for visitors, because the Palestinians want tourist dollars as much as anyone else, but LeeAnn and I were there during a time of unrest, so this was as close as we got.
- We were staying in nearby Jerusalem, and one night some Palestinian youth started yelling slogans in the square outside our window, so I got up to take a look. That was stupid, right? If anything bad were to happen, I was just asking to be a target. But what I saw were several Israeli troop vehicles roar into the square, and that put an end to the commotion.
 - The next day, we were delighted to see something perhaps unique to Israel. All young Jewish men serve three years in the military, and all young Jewish women serve two years. When we left the hotel that morning, we saw an attractive young lady, well equipped for combating terrorism, with a machine gun and all, patrolling while talking on her bejeweled pink cell phone.
- † **[Slide 2: decision chart]** Let's look now at the decision chart we used last week, as we studied the beginning verses of Ruth. I want to give you a personal example, to help solidify for you how this works, and to illustrate it for those who were not with us last week. If you were not here last week, please hold up your hand, and someone will give you an explanatory handout.
- Five years ago, before LeeAnn and I went to Dallas so I could finish seminary, I was preaching two weeks every month at a church of about 120 people, while they did a pastor search. The people were responding well to my teaching, and as the weeks went by, at least 20% of them individually told me that they hoped I would be their next pastor. This sounded good to me. I felt called to be a pastor, I had a master's degree in biblical studies, they were responsive to my teaching, we had friends in the church, and it was located less than two miles from our house. I wanted this blessing!
 - God had anointed one elder for the church, who had formed a search committee, and they did not think I was their next pastor. They said, "We love you, we are thankful you are teaching so often, but we think you should go to Dallas to finish your training, and you are not our next pastor."
 - Now I knew what the right path was, what God would want me to do. I should honor my commitment to support that elder and the work of his committee, and maintain the highest ethical standards, trusting that God would change their minds about me if that was his will. That would be the top line approach.
 - But I was tempted by the bottom line. I thought maybe I could mix some public relations into my sermons to boost my popularity; maybe I could work behind the scenes, to get those 20% to encourage a ground swell of support and convince the committee to consider me...
 - I had confidence that I could be successful in getting the blessing I wanted. But God allowed me to see that this was bottom line thinking: relying on human methods instead of letting God bless me in his way, trusting in myself instead of trusting in God and his revelation. And it would have been sinful: I would not have lied or manipulated people or anything obvious like that, but I would not have been honoring the elder and search team God had put in place and whom I had promised to support, and I might have caused divisiveness in the church.
 - I am thankful God helped me see and follow the top line, but I was tempted. We all are in these situations. The bottom line looks attractive, because it seems doable and appeals to our fleshly

way of reasoning; but we have to keep asking, what would be the top line approach, what would be the answer that follows God's revelation and trusts in his provision? The Bible doesn't say anything about how to get a job as a pastor, but it does tell us how to be ethical Christians, how to reflect God's character and represent God well, how to do the right thing and then trust God with the results. That's the kind of thinking we need to pursue.

- For those of you who were not here, let me flesh out the chart for you. If you take the top line and live God's way, there is no guarantee that God will give you the blessing you want, but you accept that he will bless you as he sees fit, and you will get spiritual blessings associated with walking with God.

Verses 1.6-18

- † **[Slide 3: three circles]** Let's come back to our narrative. You can turn in your Bibles to the book of Ruth. If you are not sure where Ruth is, take a look in the table of contents, and that will guide you.
- We are in the time when the judges ruled Israel, between when the people entered the land and when they got a king, in a time when the people generally were lawless, going through a cycle of disobedience and even idolatry, then discipline from God, then the people crying out in their need and repentance, and God restoring his covenant blessings.
 - In our narrative, there a tension [a blessing people want] of lack of food, a famine caused by God due to disobedience of the people. Instead of following God's revelation by repenting and trusting in God's promised provision, Elimelech responded with human wisdom by going to Moab where there was food. This was sinful because it did not follow what God had revealed, because God had forbidden Israelites from seeking provision in Moab specifically, and because by the Abrahamic Covenant – our three circles – Israel was to represent God to the nations, to receive God's blessing and then bless the nations, not run to the nations seeking blessing. Thus Elimelech led his family astray spiritually and God killed him shortly thereafter to make a point.
 - Elimelech's sons remained in Moab but had a tension of lack of children [that's the blessing they wanted]. Instead of responding according to God's revelation by repentantly returning to Israel and seeking God's blessing in marrying Israelite women, they both used human wisdom to marry Moabite women. This was sinful, because they still were seeking blessing in the nations and in Moab in particular, but also because they were marrying pagan women. They lived ten years without the blessing of children, and then God killed them too.
- † So we begin today at v.6. Now there will be a shift in technique in our narrative: after covering over a decade in a few verses, the author now uses more than twice as many verses to describe one conversation: a clear indication of the importance of this discussion! Last week we studied the setting for the narrative; what we see in this conversation is the theology of the two main characters.

[Slide 4: 1.6-7] 1.6-7: Then she [Naomi] arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people [the Israelites] in giving them food. ⁷So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

- † We are back to the food tension. Naomi returns to Israel and thus to the Lord's provision. In a sense, she "repents," which is to say she returns to the covenant dependence on God. Do you think her motivations are spiritual? is she truly repentant toward God for her family having acted against God's revelation and relying instead on human reasoning?

- I don't think so: she just follows the food. She is not trusting in God's promises, she is responding to what has already happened. The family left Israel for Moab when Moab had food, and now Naomi is returning to Israel only after learning that Israel has food. God will reveal Naomi's attitude to us soon, and then we will see how you evaluate her.

[Slide 5: 1.8-10] 1.8-10: And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead [her sons] and with me. ⁹May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband [a new husband]." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰And they said to her, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people."

- † After starting the walk back to Judah, Naomi tries to send her daughters-in-law away to find new husbands in Moab. This might seem considerate, but it goes against the culture and God's covenant. In this culture, when a woman married a man, she married into his family. She was considered just as much a part of that family as her husband, and in fact God's covenant law said that she had inheritance rights because of her husband. This will be important later in the narrative.

[Slide 6: 1.11] 1.11: But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?"

- † Naomi is pointing out to them that she has no more sons who could marry these ladies. We are back to the lack of child tension again. Naomi is referring to the Leverite marriage provision in God's Law. It is found in Deuteronomy 25.5-10, which we will discuss more next week. The Leverite Marriage provided that, in certain circumstances, when a married man died without a son to inherit, his brother should marry the widow and their first son would carry the name of the dead man. This protected each family's inheritance in the promised land.

[Slide 7: 1.12-15] 1.12-15: "Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, ¹³would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." ¹⁴And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law [indicating she was leaving], but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵Then she [Naomi] said, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

- † At this point, let's consider Naomi for a moment. She is an Israelite. Does she know the covenant with God? How do we know?
 - She probably does, because she refers here to the Leverite marriage aspect of it and refers to it again later too, and this is a rather obscure aspect of the Law. Also – as we shall see – there is evidence that Ruth knows the covenant, and Naomi probably was the one who had taught her.
- † Knowing the Law, did Naomi seek a covenant law answer to the situation of her daughters-in-law?
 - **[Slide 8: Decision Chart]** No! She is trying to be helpful, but she tries to help in the same way she tries to live: thinking "practically" – in terms of human wisdom – instead of seeking answers through God's covenant revelation.
 - Naomi is dismissive of the Leverite marriage principle and she does not seek any other provision in the Law for her daughters in law, so she sends them back to Moab to find pagan Moabite husbands and to worship the gods of their families! So she clearly is not taking the top line, not following God's revelation, but rather is acting with practical human wisdom, on the bottom line.

- † Do you think God would agree with Naomi’s supposed “kindness” in sending the young ladies away?
 - **[Slide 9: three circles]** No: Naomi did not seek a Covenant solution to their problem. Naomi did not honor the marriage vow in sending her daughters in law away. And Naomi did not represent God by building their faith in him. She prays the true God will bless them, but then she sends them back to their former families and their former gods!
 - Deuteronomy 13.1-11 says the penalty for leading other Israelites astray spiritually is death! Ruth is a Moabite, but she has married into an Israelite family, we will see she has become a believer, and we know from the Abrahamic Covenant that Israel was the representative of God to the other peoples. I think it’s clear that Israelites should not lead anyone astray.
- † **[Slide 10: 1.13]** Was Naomi repentant for the family’s waywardness? No, we see in v.13 that she blames God for her troubles. This will become more clear in a moment. Who do you think is to blame, God for carrying out his covenant curses or the family for going against the covenant?
- † **[Slide 11: decision chart]** In any narrative, there has to be a way to determine who is a “good” character and who is not. In the Bible, the “good” character is the one who believes in God’s revelation and acts on it, the one who does the right thing and trusts the results to God; in contrast, it is the fool or evil person who turns away from God’s revelation and relies on human reasoning.
 - If Naomi was disobedient with her family in leaving Israel, if she failed to represent God well, if she did not find answers to her problems within God’s revelation – if she is so consistently “bottom line” – would you consider her a “good” character? Is Naomi a protagonist type who is acting righteously? No!

[Slide 12: 1.16-18] 1.16-18: But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. ¹⁷Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.” ¹⁸When she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

- † When you see “The LORD” all in capitals, that refers to the name God gave himself, which we think is pronounced “Yahweh.” Ruth knows Yahweh’s name! and seeks to honor God and follow him.
 - **[Slide 13: contrast]** Consider the storytelling technique: the protagonist and antagonist in a narrative are opposites. Naomi is a loving mother-in-law, but she is not a heroine of the story! She is disobedient, weak in faith, and does not seek covenant answers or represent God well. Naomi – an Israelite who obviously knows the Covenant, because she is quoting parts of it – urges the younger women to abandon her and go back to their former families, and to abandon the true God, Yahweh, and go back to the gods of their people.
 - In contrast stands Ruth, a dreaded Moabite. Ruth pledges loyalty to Naomi, thus honoring her marriage vow and refusing to abandon her adopted family. Ruth also pledges loyalty to Israel and the True God, refusing to abandon Yahweh and return to the gods of the Moabites. Throughout the entire narrative, Ruth will seek covenantal answers to her problems: she apparently does believe what she has learned and trusts God to keep his promises!
- † **[Slide 14: Deuteronomy 10.17-19]** Look at Deuteronomy 10.17-19: “For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. ¹⁸He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love

for the alien by giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

- Based on God’s covenantal promises, what can Ruth count on at a minimum, if she honors her marriage vow, goes to Israel, and trusts in Yahweh? Sufficient provisions and justice! This is how Ruth makes her decisions.

† **[Slide 15: contrast]** The author of Ruth is illustrating here an ironic contrast: Naomi the Israelite doesn’t apply God’s revelation or seek God’s will, while Ruth the Moabite does. Irony is an important literary device. As I said last week, I believe this narrative to be true, but we still can learn a lot from how God and the human author chose to tell this narrative. In the Bible, irony often marks something significant, as it does here with the contrast between the two main characters.

† As an aside, let’s consider a couple of parallels to this irony.

- At the start of the church, Israel’s religious teachers, the Pharisees, turned away from Jesus and God’s true intentions in the Law while the despised Gentile outsiders embraced them.
- Today, many religious people in the US distort or ignore parts of God’s Word and are idle regarding the gospel mission, while missionaries reap a harvest overseas in pagan lands.

Verses 1:19-2:23

[Slide 16: 1.19-21] 1:19-21: So they both [Naomi & Ruth] went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” ²⁰She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

† Naomi had been gone over ten years. Maybe her grief has taken its toll and she has not aged well, or maybe the women were wondering why Naomi came back with a woman when she had gone away with her three men.

† As we mentioned last week, Naomi’s name means something like, “pleasant.” In contrast, Mara means “bitter.” Again, this is an indication of Naomi’s state of mind about her troubles: she blames God, not the choices she and her family made. Think for a second: what does this indicate about Naomi’s conception of God’s righteousness?

- We are hard on Naomi, but how often do we sound just like her? Do you have the same tendency to blame God for not bailing you out of your own bad choices? I am sure we have all done this from time to time, but think about your struggles right now. Are some of these the results of your own decisions, of times you acted in human wisdom instead of acting on God’s revelation?
- Could part of the solution be to walk in God’s will no matter what? Is it time now to repent? to turn back and start living God’s way on the top line, obeying God’s revelation and trusting in God to bless you as he sees fit, instead of relying on your own ideas and tactics to get what you want?

[Slide 17: 1.22-2.2] 1.22-2.2: So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. ^{2:1}Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. ²And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, “Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.”

† We are back to the food tension again. They returned just in time for the barley harvest, which is in April or May. Who came up with a plan to resolve the tension of lack of food? Ruth: while Naomi is bitterly feeling sorry for herself, Ruth sought a resolution to their problem.

† **[Slide 18: Leviticus 19.9-10]** We should note that this is a legal-covenant solution! Ruth apparently learned the Law well.

- Leviticus 19.9-10: “Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God.”
- **[Slide 19: Deuteronomy 24.19]** Deuteronomy 24.19: “When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”
- So Ruth’s request to go and glean from the edges of the fields is straight out of God’s Law. She was allowed to take the grain purposely left along the edges of the fields and to take any grain missed by the harvesters as they walked through the fields and cut the grain off.
- These provisions showed God’s concern for the needy and under-privileged in society, and his desire that those who were more blessed materially should provide for those in need. We should keep this in mind too, as we approach winter.

[Slide 20: 2.3-5] 2.3-7: So she [Ruth] departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. ⁴Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, “May the LORD be with you.” And they said to him, “May the LORD bless you.” ⁵Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, “Whose young woman is this?” [Slide 21: 2.6-7] ⁶The servant in charge of the reapers replied, “She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. ⁷And she said, ‘Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.’ Thus she came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been sitting in the house for a little while.”

† Boaz owned some of these fields and he came out of the town to check on things. He found a strange young woman there. He asked to whom she belonged because in this culture she ideally would be under the protection of her father or her husband. By the overseer’s description, Boaz would realize that Ruth had married into his family and now was a widow.

- Ruth had been gathering up food as was her legal right since the early morning, and then she found some shelter in the field hut.

[Slide 22: 2.8-10] 2.8-17: Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. ⁹Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw.” ¹⁰Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” [Slide 23: 2.11-13] ¹¹Boaz replied to her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. ¹²May the LORD

reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.” ¹³Then she said, “I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants.” [Slide 24: 2.14-17] ¹⁴At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar.” So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left. ¹⁵When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. ¹⁶Also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her.” ¹⁷So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley [roughly a peck, or half a bushel, probably about thirty pounds of grain!].

† Here the author takes some time to reveal Boaz’ character. Based on those passages from Leviticus and Deuteronomy we read a moment ago, does Boaz exceed, fall short, or just meet his covenant requirements regarding the fields? What does that suggest to you about Boaz’ heart?

- Boaz exceeds the covenant’s requirements: he protects Ruth, provides extra food beyond what the law specified, speaks kindly, honors her loyalty to Naomi, prays for God’s blessing on her, all suggesting a good heart.
- Note, this is a heart right with God! not a heart after Ruth! Boaz isn’t trying to date Ruth! He has entirely pure motives. God is an over-blesser, who cares for the needy, and thus Boaz is too.
- [Slide 25: 2.2] Boaz also recognizes that Ruth has put her faith in God’s provision, that she has sought refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. This is an important idea that will be more relevant to us later. For now it is good to note that Ruth chose to rely on God and his revelation, and Boaz realizes this and responds by also walking the top line with God.
- This is an encouragement to us: in a time of great spiritual depravity in Israel, there were still some loyal and righteous people, like Boaz, who continued to do what was right by God’s revelation. This will become more apparent as the narrative progresses too.

[Slide 26: 2.18-19] 2.18-20: She took it up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also took it out and gave Naomi what she had left after she was satisfied [from lunch]. ¹⁹Her mother-in-law then said to her, “Where did you glean today and where did you work? May he who took notice of you be blessed.” So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, “The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.” [Slide 27: 2.20] ²⁰Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed of the LORD who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead.” [The dead here would be Elimilech.] Again Naomi said to her, “The man is our relative, he is one of our closest relatives.”

† In v.2.20, Naomi literally calls Boaz a “גֹּאֵל” or “kinsman redeemer.” This is the same terminology Boaz uses to refer to himself later in v.3.12. Let’s look at Leviticus 25.25, which uses the same terminology.

- [Slide 28: Leviticus 25.25] Leviticus 25.25: “If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman [גֹּאֵל] is to come and buy back what his relative has sold.”
- What is the duty of a kinsman redeemer? To use his wealth to help a poor relative, so the family does not lose their land. He literally redeems the land: he is a redeemer, like Jesus will redeem the lost; redeeming is part of God’s character, and he wrote it into the Law. Keep this meaning in mind for kinsman redeemer as we go through the rest of the book...

[Slide 29: 2.21-23] 2.21-23 Then Ruth the Moabitess said, “Furthermore, he said to me, ‘You should stay close to my servants until they have finished all my harvest.’” ²²Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his maids, so that others do not fall upon you in another field.” ²³So she stayed close by the maids of Boaz in order to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

- † The barley harvest was in April and May, and the wheat harvest was in May and June. These were the two main grains in Israel, where the diet was heavy on bread. So the food tension seems resolved. Now we move back to the lack of children tension, which we will discuss next week.

Summary: So let’s summarize what we have learned today.

- † **[Slide 30: interpretation]** Regarding narrative interpretation, we have again seen the importance of knowing the historical and literary context. If we did not know how to refer to the Mosaic Covenantal Law for Israel, we could not accurately interpret much of what is going on.
- We also remember that space is precious. What the author emphasizes is what the author thinks is important. The author devoted a lot of space to revealing the life philosophies of the two main characters and to revealing Boaz’ character through his kindness to Ruth in the field.
 - We have learned to evaluate biblical characters based on the biblical criteria of whether they trust and obey God or trust in themselves and walk in the flesh.
 - And we have learned that God likes to use irony to signify something important.
- † **[Slide 31: narrative]** Regarding our narrative itself, we saw that Naomi heard God had blessed Israel with food again and so she returned home to Bethlehem.
- Naomi tried to send her daughters in law back to their old families and old gods, to resolve the tension of the lack of children, but Ruth chose to trust in the true God and obey her marriage obligation to this family.
 - Naomi consistently failed to look to God’s covenant for answers, and then got bitter and blamed God for her troubles. In contrast, Ruth sought an answer to the food tension in God’s covenantal law, gleaning in the fields.
 - While gleaning, Ruth met Boaz, a relative of Elimelech, probably Elimelech’s brother, who represented God by over-blessing Ruth with food and kindness. Boaz also is identified as a kinsman redeemer, a relative who could help Naomi financially by redeeming her land.
- † **[Slide 32: application]** What can we apply from all this?
- First, don’t be the subject of God’s irony like Naomi! In all situations, be a protagonist like Ruth, someone who walks the top-line, obedient to God and trusting God for the results.
 - Second, don’t be like Naomi, blaming God for the repercussions of your mistakes. Instead, repent, and start walking the top-line, even when it hurts.
 - Third, like Ruth, seek refuge under God’s wings: turn to God and trust in his provision.
 - Fourth, like Boaz, reflect God’s character by being an over-blessor who helps those in need.
 - Fifth, remember, God is a redeemer, it is so much a part of his character that he built it into the Law. Jesus reflects God the Father in this way too, being a redeemer of the lost, who paid the price with his blood to free us from our captivity to sin, evil, and death. Let’s pray...