

*Heroes of the Faith Series*

**A Perfect Romance**

**Ruth**

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# Heroes of the Faith

## Ruth

### A Perfect Romance

Along with the Song of Songs, the book of Ruth is the only specific romance in the Bible – but there again, the whole of the Bible is really a romance between God and His people, between Jesus and His bride.

Maybe you enjoy reading historical romances from time to time? Ruth is a book which has much to say about the ways of love. When reading it one may almost feel as though reading a Thomas Hardy romance. What will happen to Naomi after her husband and two sons have died? Will she end her days destitute? Will Ruth's risky plan to reach out to Boaz succeed?

**Read the book of Ruth**, then skim read the different overviews of the book before prayerfully deciding on which one(s) are most appropriate to focus on in your cluster

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### Background Information

If you love testimonies of great healings and epic battles, the book of Ruth isn't the place to find them. But the afflictions that befell Naomi, and the great blessing of how the Lord rescued her daughter-in-law is not only a perfect rural romance – it is a powerful reminder that God loves to be involved in the ups and downs of ordinary people's lives.

Whereas the Book of Judges encompasses the history of the nation over a 200 year period, this book focuses on just one family. It is a breath of fresh air after some of the more gory episodes we come across in the book of Judges. When was it written? We know that it happened in the time of the Judges and the Mideonite invasion is the only famine that we know of in that period in Israel.

### **Overview 1: Consult before Acting**

Naomi may have thought she was running on "empty" when she left famine-afflicted Israel – but she reached real rock bottom when her husband and sons died in Moab. (1:5) Was she right to have set out for Moab? Put it this way, it is easy for discontented people to leave too quickly once they come up against challenges and inconveniences. Have you never been tempted to flee too quickly from a tough situation? Sometimes this may be wisdom – but sometimes it is just a lack of perseverance. If everyone had done as Naomi did, and fled the land of Canaan, none of God's people would have been left in the Promised Land!

If Naomi harboured hopes that her sons would make up for the loss of her husband, they would soon be dashed. One disaster after another came her way, much as Job experienced. Only God can comfort someone in such deep distress – but we need to be willing to get involved too. Is there anyone you know who is experiencing grief or loss who would appreciate a visit or a helping hand?

Bethlehem means "House of Bread" in Hebrew, but we know from episodes in the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that seeking food outside Israel leads to problems, but there is no record of Naomi and her husband seeking the Lord as to what they should do when famine gripped the land. Rather, they fled over the hills on the far side of the Dead Sea, and went to Moab.

By contrast, when there was a famine in the land in David's day, the King specifically sought the Lord concerning it, and was told the real reason for it. Only when David took very specific action did God again "answer prayer on behalf of the land."

The ancient Coverdale version of the Bible translates this phrase, "God was again at one with the land" – the real meaning of atonement – at-one-ment (2 Samuel 21:1-4b, 14). The principle is simple enough – but

do we actually remember to consult the Lord before we act? Or do we merely ask Him to rubber stamp our actions?

### **What happens when we don't consult the Lord before acting?**

We cannot make formulas for failure any more than we can for success, but we can note that Naomi's two sons married Moabite women and then died along with her husband. Three widows were thus left to face an exceedingly bleak future.

*It is better to be in the land of promise than in the land of plenty!*

Naomi's name means 'Pleasant', but as a result of what she had suffered she felt 'bitter'. Knowing that there was little likelihood of anybody being willing to marry someone from outside their clan back home in Judah, Naomi encouraged her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab and take their chances of finding someone to look after them. Orpah agreed and, as a result, removes herself from the pages of biblical history.

When it is right to move on (or back) it is important not to stay where we are simply because it is familiar to us. Sometimes this is not a matter of a geographical move, so much as stepping out in faith.

Sadly, many stop following Christ when it becomes inconvenient to do so. We are on dangerous ground when we put off making key spiritual decisions. "I will wait until I've buried my father", one person said to Jesus – and it wasn't good enough. Orpah loved Naomi, but not enough to leave her country for her sake.

Hudson Taylor was engaged to a young woman, but she was not prepared to leave England to come with him to the unevangelised world of China. Hudson had a painful choice to make, but he made the right one, and dedicated himself to the Lord's purposes. Later, in one of the great loves stories of the Church, he met and married Maria in China.

It is unusual these days to find mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law enjoying each other's company so much. Ruth chose Naomi in preference to her own mother. This is all the more amazing, as her own mother would presumably have had her own house, whereas Ruth committed herself to an entirely uncertain future. It takes faith to set out like Abraham trusting only in God to provide.

Knowing she had nothing to offer them, Naomi tried to send both women home with her blessing. She hoped that they would get married again and

find rest and security in that. In those days before phones and emails, Naomi knew that she would never see these dear women again if she parted from them now.

Full marks to Naomi for not trying to persuade them to come with her to fulfil her own needs – or even because she wanted them to worship the God of Israel. Obligation rarely produces genuine conversion. Love honours a person's own deliberate choice. It is bad news (cultish even) when we try to draw people into our orbit rather than the Lord's.

The same words have different effects on different people just as different choices lead to entirely different outcomes. Whereas Orpah yielded to her own inclinations for security and the familiar, Naomi's words strengthened Ruth's resolution to set out with Naomi for Canaan.

### **Overview 2: Pledge of Loyalty**

Ruth replied, *"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."*

What exquisite words! Do we feel the same way towards our best friend, husband and wife, or towards people in our cluster group?

Notice how Naomi humbled herself and set out to return to her own land. It is important to be willing to go back if we have made a wrong decision. The famine had clearly eased enough now to permit this. Don't we appreciate the daily provision of life's necessities all the more after times when they have been in short supply?

Ruth followed Naomi back to the Promised Land, and her name has gone down in history as an ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ. This story is a powerful reminder of just how much can hang on one decision!

Do you become bitter or better when things go wrong? May the Lord help us to make wise choices – especially when we are under pressure!

### **Overview 3: It is easy to love other things more than Christ**

**Matthew 19:21-22.** Orpah returned to her gods. In all probability, once she was surrounded again by the idols of Moab, her limited knowledge of the

God of Israel would not have sufficed to keep her faith alive. In our lives we will find there are often "test points" where we have to make clear choices.

I love the phrase, "I will never leave you". Ruth has resolved that nothing shall ever part them, except for death itself. She vowed that no inducement from others, or any unkindness on the part of people who she would meet when she arrived in Israel would make her break her word. We are not meant to go round binding ourselves or others with unwise vows, but what tremendous and unwavering commitment Ruth's words represent!

Ruth's words are a picture of a resolute convert, who acknowledges that when we take the Lord to be our God, He will be our God for ever and ever. Our adherence to Christ must be even fuller and closer than that of Ruth's relationship to Naomi.

We also take His people to be our people. By definition, if they are His, they must be ours. When casting our lot in with them, we are declaring that we must be willing to fare as they fare. Is this not all part of taking up our cross, and carrying it wherever God would have us go? Even if it leads to banishment, and exile, or even to prison and martyrdom – or to the joy of serving the Lord together. Ruth resolved that nothing but death would separate them. We resolve that death itself shall not separate us, because of Christ's victory over death.

#### **Overview 4: The resolute fare best**

Ruth had every possible opportunity to withdraw, yet she chose to go forward. The more resolute we are, the less ground we give to the devil. Those who are irresolute stand with their door half-open, which encourages the powers of darkness. The resolute shut and bolt the door, and force the devil to flee in the process.

It took courage for Naomi to return, not least because of the comments she might have expected to come her way. "That's what she gets for running away from us!" (Don't forget, she was returning home with nothing more than the clothes on her back). So far as we know, there was no such pointing of the finger, but rather compassion and commiseration for her losses. She acknowledges that it is the Lord who has afflicted her, but she does not say this rebelliously. She expresses her pain, but does not turn against Him. And God provides for Ruth in the fields, and people show her great kindness. (Ruth 2:15-17).

Ruth and Naomi had no way of getting any food, except by gleaning. Otherwise they might have starved. Ruth accommodates herself to her lot and makes the most of the few opportunities that are available to her.

Some people are so proud that they would rather starve than stoop. But Ruth would not beg what she was able to earn. Ruth trusts that somehow or other providence will raise up a friend – someone who will be kind to her.

Then comes a marvellous moment: a seemingly change encounter with Boaz (2:3) the owner of the field she was gleaning in. Boaz is a relative, whose name means ‘In him is strength.’ God loves developing strategic relations with people, whether or not we have blood-ties with them.

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As one who was overseeing all the work of the servants, Boaz is a type of a faithful minister, caring for those who were toiling for him. The way Ruth falls on her face and bows to the ground in response to his kindness is the reaction (2:10) of someone who is both delighted and astonished at finding such kindness after so much hardship. Boaz made sure that his servants were kind to her, just as the Lord favours us when we are in a strange and vulnerable place. Do you have a testimony of how the Lord has taken you 'under His wing' at such a time in your life?

When Ruth says “He has comforted me by speaking in a friendly way towards me”. It is a reminder to those who are in high places just how much good they can do for those in their employment by a kind look or by speaking encouraging words to them – just as they can do so much damage by overlooking or being unkind to them. Think about these things!

Note too that Ruth gleaned until evening time. We must never be weary of well doing, and of working long and hard in the Kingdom. You never

know which seed we sow will bear real fruit. Don't abuse time. It is the one thing we can never make up.

### **Overview 5: The Daily Review**

When she first came home, Naomi wanted to know, "Where have you gleaned today?" (2:19) It is important to know where and in what company our loved ones are spending their time. It may keep them from running off to dangerous places. We may not be our brother's keeper but to some extent we must surely be our children's keepers. It is also a good question to ask ourselves: 'Where have I gleaned today? What could I gain from this day? What has the Lord shown me today? Reviewing the day's events often gives us a second chance to pick up on things the Lord has been showing us that we were in danger of forgetting.

Some of us are junkies for approval, but Scripture says: 'Let another praise you'. There are many who are name-droppers, and who boast of their great connections, but Ruth was too modest to tell Naomi Boaz's high commendations of her. One can imagine their reunion: 'Well, my daughter, are you a bride or not?!'

With the Lord, it is often a matter of A-B via C. Ruth set things in motion which the Lord would bring to completion. The difficult part now was to sit still until she knew how things would turn out. (3:18) Naomi gauged the situation perfectly. "We can expect further kindness from this man. He won't let us down. Let's not look anywhere else except for him".

'We lose divine favours if we slight them', warns Matthew Henry. What he means is that we must not overlook the opportunities we already have.

Again to her credit, Naomi wanted to see Ruth established and happy. She did not try to keep her selfishly for herself. Are we prepared to yield up the things and people and situations that matter most to us and trust them to the Lord?

### **Overview 6: A Beauty Treatment course**

A major theme in the book of Esther is the beauty treatment that Esther underwent before becoming Queen in Persia. American Christians spend a higher percentage of their income on cosmetics than they do on missionary giving. Before we are too quick to point the finger at them, it might be as



well for us to look not only at our own missionary giving, but at how much energy we put in to improving our appearance rather than our character.

The word personality roots back to a Latin word 'persona' – which means a mask. Personality may be only skin deep – a mask that we wear. The word "character" however, comes from a Greek word that means an engraving tool. In other words, character is something that is etched deep into our whole being.

You will surely agree that a good heart is better than striking looks or a large bank balance – but our heart sometimes gets out of synch with God's. Those who are unusually talented often end up trusting in their abilities and appearance rather than in the Lord. No matter how well dressed we are, we are not truly beautiful if there is coldness in our hearts.

The beauty course that some of us need to go on is to produce more inner peace, joy and patience – and less envy, frustration and anger. Hand all your abilities and gifts back to the Lord – as well as the deficiencies you are aware of – and pray for inner beauty!

We'll have to wait till we are in Heaven to find out what Ruth looked like, but she was certainly full of humility, without in any way being passive. As David Pawson puts it,

*She had the sort of boldness that men find attractive. She was incredibly loyal, and clearly had a serving spirit. On four occasions she said "I will" to Naomi.*

In Hebrew, love and loyalty are almost interchangeable. Love that is not loyal is not true love. Likewise, Just as God's covenant love is such that He sticks with us through thick and thin, so our love for each other should not be fickle, or over dependent on the mood of the moment – or on what other people think.

Some people say that the name Ruth means a 'friend'. What do you look for in a friend? Think of some of the ways in which two are better than one. Are you a faithful friend?

## **Favour**

In Hebrew "favour" is the same word as "favourite." Ruth was one of God's favourites – and became the talk of the town in Bethlehem'.

In Ruth 2:13 we see that Ruth had found 'favour' in Boaz's eyes. We came across a similar phrase in Genesis 6:8 where Noah 'found favour in the eyes of the Lord'. What does it mean to enjoy the favour of the Lord?

## Overview 7: A Happy Ending

I'm sure I am not the only one who likes romances to have a happy ending! The best books usually begin, however, at a time when the main character is facing some sudden change or danger, and the book of Ruth is no exception.

Ruth had been married to someone who was entitled to property, but because she had no husband or son, a blood-relative was under the obligation to marry her to keep her husband's name and lineage alive. When she lay at Boaz's feet, she was making it as clear as she could that she was interested in him – and he was flattered that she had chosen him. He had an older brother, however, who had to be given "first option." Mercifully, he declined the opportunity, leaving the field free for Boaz, who wanted Ruth to receive a rich reward for her courage and constancy. Boaz became an instrument for God's kindness, and so was the answer to his own prayer.

It is amazing how often God's richest blessings come out of loss and even tragedy. If Naomi had returned to the Promised Land before her husband and her sons had died, there would have been no 'need' for God to have introduced Ruth to Boaz.

Can you trace similar things in the lives of people you know?

## Overview 8: Who was Boaz?

He was a direct descendant of Judah, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and a descendant of Tamar who had been so cruelly raped, and of Rahab, who was both a Gentile and a prostitute. God incorporates the most unlikely people in His great plan! If you are tempted to despair because you come from an insignificant or dysfunctional family – take heart. Boaz and Ruth the Moabitess became the ancestors first of king David and then of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On his death bed, Jacob gave Judah this prophecy: "This sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until he

comes to whom it belongs". This was several centuries before the nation had any thought of appointing a King – and yet here was Jacob promising Judah that a royal line would come from his House. A thousand years in God's sight is but a moment!

Has God shown you something that lies ahead?  
Keep in it in your treasure box, and pray about it from time to time!

When it says that "Ruth loved Naomi, and was better to her than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15), we can see that God makes up to us for the loss of relationships that have been taken from us, and from which we expected to find our comfort. He often provides it instead from those we would least expect – and we can imagine that Naomi derived enormous joy from her role as a fully involved grandmother.

The Lord kept the news of Ruth's night-time visit to lie at Boaz's feet from other people in order to protect her reputation. It is important to keep both a good conscience and a good name. There are times when we must avoid not only sin, but also the appearance of sin.

Certainly, Ruth's actions in lying down at Boaz's feet are not to be developed into a precedent – it is too much like bringing spark and tinder together, which can kindle a dangerous fire – but it was the right gesture at this time. She laid her request at his feet, just as we lay our requests at the feet of our Redeemer.

Ruth's humility had paved the way for her honour, and Boaz would not slight her, nor do anything to dishonour her. The less she proclaimed her own goodness, the more her neighbours noted it. How lovely such humility and virtues are. How unattractive, by contrast, are the cold and calculating!

It would have been as nasty shock to discover that there was one who was a closer kinsman than Boaz. Boaz doesn't want Ruth to marry this other kinsman, but he has a duty to bring the matter to his attention. The reader is thus kept in suspense as Boaz sends her away laden with gifts.

The old expression says, 'Be careful for nothing, but cast your care on God'. As He has promised to care for you. 'Delight yourselves in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart'. (Psalm 37:4-5), and 'The Lord will fulfil his purposes for me'. (Psalm 138:8).

The next day, Boaz met with ten elders in the Town Hall, by the gate where the public business was transacted. In God's providence, his relative and

‘rival’ just happened to be there. Naomi’s land had been mortgaged for money to buy bread when the famine had first struck. Boaz was honourable in his dealings, when he might just have rushed to secure the transaction without saying anything to his kinsman. He thought he would obtain the land at a good price, and that the widow would be keen to sell; he had not realised that he would be taking on the widow too. The kinsman did not want to meddle with this in case this affected his own inheritance (or his own married state!) So far as he was concerned, it suddenly began to sound like a really bad deal. Marry a poor widow who came from a strange country, and who had to live on alms? That would be a blemish to his family line, and would be all but certain to cause strife and contention if he were to take her to be his wife!

### **Conclusion**

David Pawson says, ‘The whole Bible is a romance, finishing with the wedding supper of the Lamb in the book of Revelation. The Ruth-Boaz romance is a perfect picture of Christ and his Gentile bride.’ In that case, we are the bride and He is the bridegroom. Boaz, like Christ, is a kinsman-redeemer, and the Church is like Ruth.

Henceforth, Ruth would be in charge of those servants whom she had associated with, and of those fields in which she gleaned. God can raise up the poor out of the dust and set them with princes (Psalm 108:7-8). Naomi had been a successful match-maker.

Far more than in many parts of the world, our nation is lacking in any living awareness of the Lord’s presence and activity. We find in this story a great air of devotion, as witnessed by the way people greeted each other with blessings, and prayed at Ruth and Boaz’s wedding. Such prayer was far from being a mere formality. May the Lord use each one of us to help restore this dimension of spiritual awareness into the life of our nation.