

# RUTH

## Central Focus Small Group Studies 2008

Study Notes by Lee Gatiss



## Read Ruth 1

1. Outline the development of the story in chapter 1. If you are feeling creative, give each section of the plot a title from a film or book!
2. Do you think it was right for Elimelech and Naomi to move to Moab? Why or why not?
3. Outline the two different responses of Orpah and Ruth and what motivated them, in your own words.
4. Why does Naomi change her name?
5. Look back and write down what the chapter says about the LORD. How would you summarise your findings?
6. What is God aiming to achieve in us as we read this chapter?

## Ruth 1 - Study Notes

### Main Point and Purpose

*The purpose of this section is to delight us with the conversion of a Moabite which providentially comes about because of the tragic suffering of an Israelite family.*

**1-5 Out of the frying pan into the fire.** The book opens by telling us that it is set in the time of the judges. In other words, there is no king and moral chaos rules in an unstable and oppressed Israel. Yet the book will end with the genealogy of King David whose reign brought an end to that period in so many ways. The first character we hear about is Elimelech and he is from Bethlehem, a place prominent in the last 5 chapters of Judges (e.g. it is the home of the Levite in Judges 17 and the concubine in chapter 19). It means "house of bread" which is ironic since there was a famine on, a sign of God's judgment and a curse of the covenant (see Deut 32:24 for 'hunger', the same word as 'famine' here). Elimelech means 'My God is King', which is a great start in this context (see Judges 8:23), and his wife Naomi is "sweet". Their children however are more ominously called "sick" and "had it". Whether they should have moved to Moab to escape the famine is not completely clear, though there was much bad feeling between the two nations (see Numbers 22-25 and Judges 3:15-30) and it would not provide a good godly environment for the children, who may well end up marrying pagan wives... Note how the paragraph develops the sadness stage by stage as the paragraph develops. They escaped from famine only to face death.

**6-14 The long march home.** Deut 30:1-10 makes it clear that if the Israelites only repented then God would restore blessing to them after the curses of the covenant. That may have been a better option for Elimelech in verse 1, and Naomi does not want to repeat his mistake and so now that she is left to make her own decisions she repents/returns (same word in Hebrew). She leaves with Orpah and Ruth because she hears that the Lord has provided food for his people. Note that God is specifically mentioned as source of this blessing – was this Naomi's perspective or the author's interpretation? She realises on the way, however, that it might be better for her daughters-in-law if they don't go to a country where young women are gang raped and left to die on the doorstep (see the incident in Judges 19), or indeed to a place where Moabites are not very welcome (see Deut 23:3-6). She prays for God's blessing on them (though his hand is against *her*) and tells them it is pointless waiting for her to provide them with new husbands! Orpah decides she knows what's best for her and leaves.

**15-18 A Bethlehem Road Experience.** Ruth, on the other hand, has other ideas. In a moment which will affect her destiny and play a crucial role in God's plan for his people, she decides not to leave Naomi but to stick to her, and her God. Her declaration in these verses is a turning point and a high point of the book. She binds herself to Naomi, even though she is not obligated to, with a strong, covenant love. She will follow Naomi, join her people, and worship her God. She will live and die with Naomi. She has been converted, expressing her 'new birth' (as it were) by showing love for God and for his people, specifically Naomi.

**19-22 What's in a name?** Bethlehem is stirred up by their arrival, and they hardly recognise Naomi after what has happened to her. She changes her name from 'Sweet' to 'Bitter' because her life seems to have been anything but pleasant. The fact that she thinks God is testifying against her could well be taken as a sign that the family's initial move to Moab at the start of the chapter was in fact an act of unbelief, for which they have been judged. But now she has returned/repented. Ruth wasn't from Israel so how can it say she 'returned' in verse 22? It would perhaps be better in her case to translate the word 'repented', since she certainly was, in that sense, coming home to her new God and her new people.

### Application

**1. Conversion of the Gentiles.** The promise to Abraham that through his family all nations would be blessed has a small fulfilment here as a woman from Moab becomes a follower of the Lord. One of her descendents would be the messiah, through whom this promise received its ultimate fulfilment (see Matthew 1:1, 5 where she is explicitly and surprisingly named as Jesus' ancestor, in a section containing almost all male names). Ruth's conversion is a small picture of the future conversion of the gentiles by the gospel (including those in London, England) and points to God's ancient commitment to save the nations which is our great inspiration and hope. We are meant to cheer!

**2. God has a plan.** God's purpose in the suffering of Elimelech's family is not completely clear at this stage, but in the wider context it can be seen to be a wonderful providence which leads to Israel's greatest king, David, and ultimately the Lord Jesus himself. God is working his purpose out and even anticipates and incorporates the (possibly) sinful decisions of his people. This gives us hope in the midst of suffering, that God has a plan even when we don't see or understand it. We are encouraged to trust him.

**3. Run to God and his people.** From Mara's perspective, God's purposes are not known yet, only his 'testimony' against her. Though she is going through a very difficult time (and we are meant to empathise with her emotional devastation), she does not abandon God. Her laudable impulse is to return to him and his people for comfort.

**4. Ruth's covenant love.** Ruth's love for Naomi is a terrific example of what it looks like to love our neighbour as ourselves and express selfless commitment to people alongside loving God. She didn't do what seemed best for her or what looked most sensible from a worldly perspective, but potentially sacrificed her own prospects in order to love Naomi. What might seem like a histrionic gesture of little value in the world's eyes turns out to be a crucial event in God's cosmic plan! Are there situations in our lives where such choices might be difficult and costly and yet right and godly? What can we learn from Ruth's example in this? We are inspired to imitate her.

## Read Ruth 2

1. Write a curriculum vitae for Boaz, using the details provided in this chapter:
2. Boaz helped Ruth. What reasons does the text give for this? What does the text not say about his motives?
3. Why is Naomi so excited by it all?
4. Look back over the chapter as a whole and write down what is said about the LORD. How would you summarise your findings?
5. What is God aiming to achieve in us as we read this chapter?

## Ruth 2 - Study Notes

### Main Point and Purpose

*The purpose of this section is to demonstrate how Ruth found favour with God's people as she came for refuge under the wings of the God who blesses.*

**1-7 A gracious God and a diligent woman.** We are introduced to Boaz in verse 1 but we are not told that Ruth knew who he was immediately. She merely wanted to find a safe place to glean where she would not be harassed. God's Law stipulated that farmers were not to harvest the corners of their fields but leave grain for the poor and for immigrants (e.g. from Moab!) to collect or 'glean' (see Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22). Ruth 'just happens' to end up in the field of this worthy man who we are told twice is of the clan of Elimelech (and therefore a relative of Naomi). Boaz turns up right on cue from the town to visit the reapers and is portrayed as a pious God-fearing man who knows where blessing comes from (see the exchange in verse 4). He asks who Ruth is and hears of her polite gratitude for being able to glean there, her diligent hard work, and her relationship to Naomi. Note that her Moabite heritage is alluded to several times in the chapter ("Ruth the Moabite" in verses 2, 6, 21).

**8-13 A gracious God and a generous man.** Boaz addresses Ruth as "daughter", thus acknowledging their (extended) family relationship which is a good sign. He adopts her into his workgroup with the 'employment protection' and rights that entails. She is very grateful but not sure why she is so blessed. Boaz answers that he is aware both of her love for Naomi and her vulnerability in a foreign land, and in the most important verse of the passage he prays for her to be rewarded by God for turning to him as her God and for sticking with Naomi. He is, of course, answering his own prayer by being so generous to her, and she is thankful though keeps a humble distance from him, not presuming to be even one of his servants.

**14-16 A dinner date and a charitable plan.** Boaz could have left it at that but he goes even further in his generosity towards Ruth by allowing her to eat her fill at his table. Boaz then instructs his men to make sure she gets even more than she would normally be able to glean, as a way of increasing his generosity to her but without making her feel that she is even more of a 'charity case' (she still has to glean what they 'accidentally' pull from the bundles, and does so until the evening. In the context of the time of the judges (1:1) the fact that we see here a man treating a woman well is surely a significant blessing (compare Judges 19-21 for instance). No other motives are attributed to Boaz in the text. He *may* fancy her (!) but his surprise in 3:10 most probably indicates that he thought it very unlikely she would reciprocate, so he's just being generous and kind.

**17-23 The mother-in-law and God's blessing.** Here we discover just how generous Boaz was to Ruth. She had a huge amount of barley (at least a fortnight's worth, possibly more) from her day's work, and also some leftover food to give to Naomi. Naomi is surprised and pronounces a blessing on the one who had so helped Ruth (both before and after she finds out who he was). Special blessing was promised in the Law for those farmers who did leave the sides of their fields for the poor (Deut 24:19) but this field's owner will end up with more than he ever dreamed! Naomi is excited because of Boaz's generosity but also because he is one of her redeemers – a close relative with potential rights to her property who was expected to look after a widow such as her. This will become highly significant in the rest of the book – that he is a redeemer, but only one of them. Naomi is also pleased because Ruth will now have greater security as she gleaned and provides for their welfare, in a time when her being assaulted (verse 22) may not have been an unusual thing.

### Application

**1. Blessed are those...** In the previous chapter Ruth turned away from her god and her Moabite family and turned to the true God and his people. Here we see her being blessed in that new state, by God (whose Law provides for her) through his people (especially Boaz, who is so generous to her). This should be a normal expectation: when we turn to God we find the blessings of his gracious provision and the benefit of being part of his church. Blessed are those who take refuge in him (Psalm 2:12, 34:8). As Jesus said to Peter in Mark 10:29-30, following him may be costly but it also brings blessings both now and in eternity as we share together with other Christians in blessing (and persecutions). He is not an automatic blessing dispenser, but he does delight to look after those who come to him.

**2. God's blessing.** God is portrayed as a God who blesses throughout this passage. At the end of chapter 1 Mara was bitter that he had brought calamity on her (1:21) but now the emptiness from her tragic time in Moab is reversed. In this chapter all we hear about is how God's people in God's place are enjoying his blessing. This is an encouragement to those who have slipped away from God or who do not yet know him – come to him as the one who fills those who are empty and feeds those who are hungry (Matthew 5:1-12). Do we think of God as a generous and blessing God who wants the best for us as our heavenly Father?

**3. Jews and Gentiles.** Ruth the Moabite is blessed under God's care, as a foretaste of the blessing to the nations which will come through her descendent, Jesus. But note too that Naomi, the Israelite, is blessed as a result of the inclusion of this gentile into the people of God. This is how it is meant to be: Jews and Gentiles together enjoying God's blessing.

**4. God's Providence.** Again we see God's unseen hand directing the action in Ruth and Naomi's life. Ruth 'just happens' to glean in the field of the man who is one of her redeemers, and a generous man at that.

## Read Ruth 3

1. In your own words, what is Naomi telling Ruth to do in verses 15?
2. In the light of what Boaz said to Ruth in 2:12, what is she asking him to do?
3. What does Boaz promise to do?
4. Does this passage sanction sex outside marriage, as some think? Why, or why not?
5. Why is it said in 3:17 that the barley is for Naomi? (Compare with 1:21).
6. What do we learn here about how God fulfils his sovereign purposes?

## Ruth 3 - Study Notes

### Main Point and Purpose

*The purpose of this section is to delight us with how Ruth got Boaz to be the answer to his own prayer and Naomi's for her to find blessing and rest.*

**1-5 A risky plan.** Ruth and Naomi are not the type to wait for blessing to fall into their laps. Naomi has a man in mind and a plan, so Ruth will at last have "rest" (see 1:9) - not the word *shalom* or the word in the phrase "the land had rest" [Judges 3:11, 30], or the word for the rest Boaz lacks in 3:18, but a word meaning a place to settle down, such as the dove finds in Genesis 8:9). She advises Ruth to get dolled up, splash on a bit of perfume and go down to the party at the threshing floor where Boaz and his men are eating and drinking. Then she suggests Ruth basically offers herself to Boaz once he's in a nice relaxed mood. "Uncover his feet" does not necessarily mean any more than it says, though some have seen in it a more sexual connotation (but see 3:8 where she appears literally at his feet and 3:14 where she remains). "He will tell you what to do" is the precarious part of the plan. It sounds distinctly risky and risqué. But Ruth agrees to the plan.

**6-9 A glamorous surprise.** Boaz has a good night with the men and then lies down to guard his harvest (see 1:6). Ruth creeps over and lies down at his feet. In the middle of the night Boaz wakes up suddenly when he realises he is not alone. He was perhaps expecting to find a thief after his barley, but instead finds a glamorous woman (remember 3:3) in bed with him! She must have looked different to the woman he usually saw sweating in the fields gleaning for grain (either that or he didn't have his glasses on and it was dark) so he asks who she is. Her reply is to the effect that, "I'm all yours. You're my redeemer - let's get married." She makes it clear that she is his servant but is careful to make her proposition more than merely sexual (which Naomi's original plan might have implied). Mentioning his relationship to her as a "redeemer" - one of those in her extended family with responsibility for her welfare - shows she is after more than a one-night stand. Asking him to spread his wings over her, as he had prayed for God's wings to protect her (2:12), was more a proposition of marriage. She has gambled on Boaz's honourable character - which she saw demonstrated in chapter 2 - in following this plan.

**10-13 An honourable man.** Boaz has behaved impeccably towards Ruth in the story so far. He has been more of a benefactor than a potential husband, and rather than flirting with her he has sought to protect her from the unwanted approaches of men (e.g. 2:9). We know he is "a worthy man" (2:1) but what will the man do in a merry mood when he finds a beautiful woman in his bed? Boaz must have thought he was dreaming! But his first thought is to invoke God's blessing on Ruth for showing him kindness - ironic since that is all he had done for *her* since he met her (see 2:20). It shows that he was attracted to her character, for he has already said how much he admires her attitude towards Naomi (2:11), and he refers to her honourable standing amongst all the people of Bethlehem. She is "a worthy woman" just as he is "a worthy man" and so he promises to act honourably towards her and do as she has asked. But his honour also realises that he is not first in line legally - there is another "redeemer" with prior legal claim on Naomi, her land, and her household. Boaz resolves to discuss the matter with him as soon as possible! For her safety, he tells Ruth not to leave just yet. But note there is no hint of sexual impropriety.

**14-18 The morning after.** As it starts to get light, Ruth gets up to leave, and Boaz asks her to keep their liaison a secret for the moment - for propriety's sake (people may draw the wrong conclusions) and also so as not to prejudice his business deal in the next chapter perhaps. Having said that Ruth is not the kind of woman who waits for God's blessing to fall into her lap, she now does literally have blessing poured into her lap (six measures of barley). Getting home safely, she reports back to Naomi and gives her the barley as if it is a 'sweetener' from Boaz directly to Naomi (buttering up the in-laws is often a good plan!). Certainly by giving Ruth such a large amount of grain Boaz is showing his intent to look after Naomi - her bitter emptiness (1:21) will soon end. Naomi takes this as a good sign and can tell that Boaz is keen. As a man of action she realises he will settle the business side of the transaction as quickly as he can. Ruth won't need to wait long.

### Application

**1. Sanctified seduction?** As with all biblical narrative we must remember that not everything that is described is necessarily prescribed. We have already seen that in Judges! So it would be wrong to say Naomi's plan is a blueprint for how to get a husband. It is certainly risky and could have gone very wrong if Boaz not been "a worthy man", and Ruth was totally up front about the kind of commitment she was seeking. It is important to be clear about this so we are not deceived into thinking this story somehow sanctions or suggests sexual activity outside marriage. It doesn't. Boaz and Ruth do not sleep together until they are married in 4:13. It doesn't say Ruth was wrong to get dressed up and make sure Boaz noticed her either, but it is placed in a context where we know the upright characters of the couple. What is worthy of emulation is their worthiness, integrity, and restraint.

**2. Answering our own prayers.** Boaz prayed that God would reward and protect Ruth in chapter 2, as she came under his wings. Now she asks Boaz to answer his own prayer and spread *his* wings over her. Similarly Naomi prayed for Ruth to find a resting place in 1:9 which she now plots to secure for her. Sometimes, we can be, or provide, the answer to our own prayers. If we pray for God's blessings on others - can we provide them? If we pray for workers to go out into the harvest field for God (Matthew 9:38) - could we be those workers? It is not always possible to be the answer to our prayers, but sometimes it is. Are we looking for such opportunities?

**3. God's sovereignty and our freedom.** The story of Ruth so far shows us how God's rule over every aspect of life on earth does not conflict with the meaningful freedom of action we enjoy. We make real choices, and are not puppets

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manipulated by hidden strings. Yet we are not masters of our own fate – God remains in control. There is no attempt to 'resolve a conflict' between these truths. But we are shown that God works through means, through human choices and actions, to achieve his purposes - and so faith does not need to be passively waiting around for something to happen. Ruth didn't! Are there areas of life where we are too passive, paralysed by fatalism and thinking it wrong to do anything except sit and wait for God to do something? In our growth in holiness perhaps, or in a matter of guidance? God works through means, our responsible careful decisions, and our calculated risks.

**Read Ruth 4**

1. What sort of business man was Boaz, according to verses 16? Outline his strategy for securing “the deal”.
  
2. Read Deuteronomy 25:5-10. How would you explain this law on “levirate marriage” to someone?
  
3. Compare the role of the sandal in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and Ruth 4:7-8. Why do you think the narrator mentions it in Ruth 4?
  
4. What does the blessing in verse 11 mean? Hint: see Genesis 29:30.
  
5. What is noteworthy about Tamar in verse 12? Hint: see Genesis 38 and Ruth 4:18.
  
6. What is the function of verses 13-17 in the book as a whole?
  
7. See Jesus’ family tree in Matthew 1:1-17. What is significant about the few women who are mentioned?

## Ruth 4 - Study Notes

### Main Point and Purpose

*The purpose of this section is to show us how Ruth and Naomi were finally redeemed from emptiness to fullness, to play a part in the coming of the messiah.*

**1-6 Boaz goes to town.** Boaz goes straight to the place of business (the gate of the town) as he promised in 3:13 and as Naomi said he would in 3:18. Providentially, the "redeemer", the kinsman closer to Naomi and Ruth than Boaz was (and who consequently had prior legal claim on them and their land) comes along as Boaz is sitting there. The narrative slows down so we can picture the scene: Boaz says, "come and sit down." The man (never named – he is not that important) comes and sits down. Boaz gets 10 of the leaders in the town together as well, in order to make sure what is about to happen is properly agreed to and witnessed, since he doesn't want any doubt to remain. He first suggests that the redeemer should buy/redeem the land Naomi holds, but doesn't mention how Ruth comes with the package. We wonder, "What is Boaz doing?!" But once the redeemer finds out about Ruth he realises it will mean splitting his inheritance between more wives and children, and clearly the land is not worth that much to him. Boaz shrewdly makes him realise this so he offers the deal to Boaz instead.

**7-10 The Redeemer gets cold feet.** The law regarding levirate marriage (the arrangement whereby a relative marries a widow in order to keep the dead man's name alive) is described in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. If a man refused to go through with such a marriage then the prescribed public humiliation involved removing his sandal and spitting in his face. This is why we are told about the more positive sandal-removing ceremony in 4:7-8. Here the removal of the sandal signifies merely the sealing of the deal, much like a handshake in our culture. But contrasting it with Deut 25 shows that the curse/punishment from the Law is transformed into a blessing for Boaz. He calls the elders to witness that he has bought everything that belonged to the ill-fated Elimelech and his sons (see 1:1-5). He even says he has "bought" Ruth to be his wife, which sounds strange to our ears but is put into context by the less commercial atmosphere of chapter 3. He marries Ruth in order to "perpetuate the name of the dead" as laid down in Deut 25, so their first child will be considered as the heir of the dead men (4:9).

**11-12 A blessing on Ruth and Boaz.** Boaz and the elders are joined by others at the gate, and they all join together in blessing the happy couple. They pray for God's blessing on Ruth that she will become like Rachel and Leah, the wives of the patriarch Jacob (see Genesis 29-30) i.e. that she will play a significant role in building up the nation of Israel despite her Moabite origins. They pray that Boaz will continue to act worthily (2:1) and be famous. The prayer that his house(hold) will be like that of Perez sounds odd at first, since Perez was not one of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or one of his twelve sons) but the son of an illicit liaison between Judah and his daughter-in-law (see Genesis 38). But in verses 18-22 we discover that Boaz himself was from this family line. Bringing this less than savoury family history up might not have been thought appropriate for such a time, but clearly the family line of Perez was considered worthy and good in some way despite that. In the same way, the unusual alliance of Boaz with a much younger woman from Moab (a whole nation descended from an incestuous relationship, Genesis 19:30-37!) will be blessed and their family 'worthy' (see 18-22).

**13-22 Naomi blessed, and Israel too.** Ruth and Boaz marry and have a son, which the Lord had not allowed to happen for Ruth and her previous husband. The women of the town realise that this is a blessing for Naomi too, since with an heir now (the baby is technically the redeemer now, since he inherits the property of Elimelech, Naomi's dead husband) she and her family inheritance are safe. They remind Naomi that this blessing has come through Ruth, whose hard work, shrewdness, and faithful dedication make her more valuable than even seven sons (which she may not have appreciated earlier in 1:21 when she complained of having nothing). Nevertheless, she plays a leading role in the new baby's life as his nurse: as before (2:18 and 3:17) Ruth shares her blessing with her mother-in-law. Blessing has fallen into Naomi's lap now too, despite adversity, and through the covenant faithfulness of a gentile woman. We are told twice in the last few verses that Obed is the grandfather of King David (verse 17 and in the genealogy in 18-22). This gives a wider context to the story as a whole, and shows how the prayers of 11-12 are answered: this family line will result in the blessing of a faithful king who serves God and leads Israel to her greatest safety and strength. David too will have to suffer adversity, before he obtains the throne, as we see in 1 Samuel, yet from his family comes the messiah himself (Matthew 1:1-5-6). With so much of Ruth's story revolving around a "redeemer", it is a fitting conclusion to see that in his human nature, the hoped for "redeemer of Israel" himself (Luke 24:21) comes from her family line.

### Application

**1. Praise God for our redemption inheritance.** The language of redemption is key in the story of Ruth (2:20, 3:9-13, 4:1, 3, 4, 6-8, 14) and comes to its fulfilment in chapter 4. This book gives us, therefore, an important background to the New Testament's use of that language to describe what Christ has done for us, rivalled only by Isaiah's use of the same theme (e.g. Isaiah 41:14, 54:5). Boaz and Obed redeem not only land but also Naomi and Ruth, securing an inheritance in the process. In the same way, our redemption by Christ redeems us from death (see Hosea 13:14) and obtains an inheritance for us: "those who are called may receive the promised eternal *inheritance*, since a death has occurred that *redeems* them" (Hebrews 9:15). In Romans 8:23 and Galatians 4:5 redemption of us and our bodies is linked to our adoption by God and consequent share in his inheritance. Praise God that like Naomi and Ruth we are redeemed out of hopeless emptiness into the fullness of a secured inheritance which is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4).

**2. Imitate costly redemption.** In Boaz's discussion with 'the redeemer' we see how costly it was to act as kinsman-redeemer, which Boaz has to go out of his way to be. This emphasises Boaz's compassionate and covenant love in being the redeemer, even for 'a foreigner.' In this Boaz is a picture and a foreshadowing of Christ himself, who chooses to redeem us at the cost of his own life ("redemption through his blood", Ephesians 1:7). It was by such sacrificial, covenant love – also exemplified by Ruth of course - that a faithful remnant was preserved in Israel during the evil days of the judges when people usually did only what was best for them. Clearly, inasmuch as Boaz and Ruth imitate God's loving kindness, we are to imitate them in our equally self-centred days (see Ephesians 5:1-2). Costly, sacrificial love for our neighbours, even the unworthy ones, can be greatly used and blessed by God.