

Ruth's Faithfulness

You are reading through the Old Testament, encountering tumultuous stories about the blessed people of



Michael K. Olmsted

God, wandering into the world of pagan gods, overcoming enemies and being overwhelmed, God raising up deliverers, the people both hearing and closing their ears to the prophets of God ... and there appears, without warning or logical arrangement, a book named Ruth. What is even stranger is that Ruth is a foreigner from Moab! No complex theological truths are elaborated, no emphasis on God's laws or holy days are taught, and the story line is hope-filled, almost feeling out of place!

Scholars continue to debate how "Ruth" ever got into the Old Testament canon. This is a simple story, written in tragedy, suffering, courage, faith and love. But, then, is that not the kind of story we all need to hold on to and repeat to each other in a world clouded by hopelessness?

Our story is set in a time of severe drought in the Promised Land, when a family, Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons traveled about sixty miles southeast of Judah, to the other side of the Dead Sea for a new beginning. This was not a normal move for any Israelite family, but Elimelech could not allow his family to starve! The troubles of life are not limited by national borders. Time passed, the two sons took wives from the people of Moab; then tragedy struck a horrendous blow when Elimelech and both sons died, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law with no future. Orpah and Ruth had no children to connect them to Moab and no personal support.

Were there no options? News that the drought was over in Judah prompted Naomi to decide to return home, realistically advising her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab where they could find family support and a chance to remarry (vv. 8-9). Both Orpah and Ruth persisted, but Naomi explained she could never bear sons they would be able to marry: "No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned

against me" (v. 13).

This fatalism and interpretation that God was punishing Ruth was common thinking. Was she being punished because she and her husband moved to a pagan land and their sons married foreigners? Did not God teach that his people should treat "strangers" with kindness and were they not welcome to become worshippers of the true and living God? There is no hint in this story that Naomi's family turned to false gods in their time of need. It is obvious from Naomi's wise advice that she loved her daughter-in-law. Her tragedy need not burden their lives any further.

"Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her" (v. 14). Naomi urged Ruth to stay with her family a second time, but Ruth rejected her advice in a moving vow that is so eloquent it has become a common quote in modern day weddings, including, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (v. 16). The only logical explanation for Ruth's decision is that she had witnessed in Naomi and her family a profound faith difference in their God that translated in how they loved and lived. For a woman in that day to walk away from her family and religion would be very unusual.

In Naomi's advice to her daughters-in-law there is the background idea of the Jewish practice of "levirate marriage," the idea that when a husband dies without producing a male heir, a brother of the deceased takes the widow as his own wife so the family lineage of the dead brother may continue. (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). Naomi's two sons were dead and she was too old to bear another son to continue the family line or provide a new husband for either Orpah or Ruth. Orpah kisses the mother-in-law she loves and heeds her advice. Ruth stands firm in her decision and begins a beautiful journey that will bring her love and joy, as well as a place in God's plan of redemption for the world.

The story line and nuances of this Old Testament book, focused on two women instead of men, compels the reader to see beyond common thinking of Jewish society in that day and begin to understand God is not a prisoner of the expected. Faith has

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taken root in Ruth's heart and Naomi will become the instrument of God's love and purpose. Two women begin an uncertain adventure that will be marked by many God experiences, strategic circumstances, the wisdom of women in a male-dominated society, and love that is both human and divine. But isn't that how God's grace is expressed ... God stepping into our world ... his love becoming real in our struggles?

We all make decisions every day about education, career, marriage, children, finances and God. Do you know the outcome of your decisions as they are formed? Did Naomi or Ruth have any idea what life would look like back in Judah? A significant part of life's excitement is the unknowable outcome of all your choices. Of course, faith in God makes the difference, but there are challenges and even tragedies along the way. As Ruth's story unfolds, be prepared for surprises and complications while God reveals his love.

There is an advantage for us because we are living on this side of the cross, but we still cannot know all the answers. So we operate on faith, we trust God in the complications of life, and we seek God's guidance through his Word and the Holy Spirit.

My life has been marked by surprises and a few very challenging circumstances. I have felt lonely, wounded and even lost from hope, but God has always been with me. I made some choices that were risky from a human perspective but resulted in great joy.

Living by faith is not knowing for certain: it is knowing God! It is permissible to make mistakes, but always remember God's grace invites you back to hope, even if you are in a strange place like Moab. God gives us an odd gift called free will. I have seen God turn what seemed like bad decisions into opportunities. Who would have ever guessed Naomi's move to Moab would connect her to Ruth, who would end up the wife of Boaz, and be listed in the genealogy of Jesus? When your desire is to be faithful to God, living becomes a channel through which God can do some wonderful things. Just wait for the rest of this story!

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.