



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Committed to the End Ruth 1:16-18; 4:13-22

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We all have to admit that there are parts of the Bible that, when we read them, we are unsure what the point is and why this writing has ended up being regarded as the inspired word of God. The Old Testament is filled with stories of war, brutality, odd customs, and ancient references that leave the casual reader scratching his head, wondering “What is God doing?” and “What purpose does this passage have for my life?” The book of Ruth might be one of those books. It is an interesting story of two strong women and an honorable man. It is an interesting book in the Old Testament for several reasons. The book of Ruth is the only book in the Old Testament named for a non-Israelite. Ruth was not an Israelite but a Moabite. As a descendent of Lot’s wife, she had married into an Israelite family. Ruth was not only a non-Israelite, but the book of Ruth has other characters that are really more the main characters instead of Ruth.

There is Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, with whom the book of Ruth begins and ends. Many suggest this should be the book of Naomi. It is her story of tragedy turned to hope that is the beginning and end of the book. Others believe the book should be named after Boaz. Boaz is the “Christ character” in the book. It is his mercy, hospitality and commitment to a stranger and “foreigner” that makes him so intriguing in this ancient story. Other suggests the book should be about Obed. The story really is about how God keeps the line of Jesus alive. This is ultimately the story of Obed, who is Jesse’s father and who is, of course, the father of King David and through whom the line to which Jesus was born. Ruth is also a story of faithfulness, and God’s faithfulness, that is found as the transition book from the book of Judges, which is filled with morally bankrupt and faithless people, to the books of Samuel and God’s faithfulness to his people. Despite all this, the book has Ruth’s name as the name that embodies this ancient story. I want to tell you this story like it is written. For it is written as a short story, a novella or a “tale.”

In the land of Judah in Bethlehem there lived a man by the name of Elimelech. Elimelech and his wife

Naomi had two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. During the time when the Judges ruled Judah, there was a famine in the land. In an attempt to care for his family, Elimelech moved his wife and children to the land of Moab. The land of Moab actually reads “a field in Moab.” The picture is that Elimelech moved his family for a sojourn – a temporary time – to a place where there was food and provision. Elimelech was doing what any father and provider would do. There was a famine in his land; so he found a place where he could provide for his family. The move to Moab is an interesting move. It is not one that would have been made without some hesitation, for the people of Israel despised the Moabites for several reasons. First, they were the descendents of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter. Second, the women of Moab were known for their seduction of Israel’s men and their subsequent punishment. In addition recently, the king of Moab, Eglon, had been oppressing the Israelites. In response, the Israelites forbade the Moabites from the assembly of the Lord. So, into this enemy’s territory and unpleasant place they went to find provision in a time of famine. However, for Elimelech things do not go as planned. His journey to Moab would be his final one; while in Moab Elimelech died. His sons, while there, marry Moabite women. Then the unthinkable happens to Naomi, Elimelech’s wife and widow: her two sons also die in Moab. Naomi is left far from home and without resources or family, and now, with two foreign daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, Naomi faces the reality of her situation; she decides to attempt to return to Judah. As for her daughters-in-law, she tells them to go back home to their mothers’ houses. Naomi concludes that there is no hope for the three of them to be a family. Naomi says

I am an old woman and I will not marry again. Even if I had a husband tonight and could give birth to sons, what are you going to do? Are you going to wait for them to grow up so you could marry them?

In other words, these three women were facing a hopeless situation. The best solution was for everyone to go back to their own families with the hope they could find acceptance and provision. This is a heart-wrenching decision; in fact, the Bible tells us that twice they wept out loud. They wept uncontrollably at the thought of separation. Orpah chooses to leave and go back to her family; however, Ruth will not leave. She tells Naomi

Stop urging me to leave you. I will stay with you. I will go with you. Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge, and your people shall be my people and your god my god.

Ruth makes her vow and commitment to Naomi that she will not abandon her, no matter what might come. So, they set out together for Judah and arrive in Bethlehem where Naomi tells her tragic story. She concludes that God has brought misfortune on her and that she should not be called Naomi but Mara, for her life is very bitter.

The Bible tells us that Naomi did have a relative that lived in Bethlehem. His name was Boaz and he was a wealthy man. Now Ruth makes the decision that they must have some kind of provision for her and Naomi. She decides that since she is a young woman she will go and work in the fields, since it was the time of the harvest. Ruth decides she will find work somewhere and she does. She begins to work in one of the fields with the servant girls who clean up the leftover crop after the harvesters had been through. The next part of the story is a great twist. It is written in the Bible this way: as it turned out. Some say it should be interpreted “as luck or chance would have it.” This would be in contrast to Naomi’s thoughts about misfortune. “As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech”(2.3). Boaz quickly notices Ruth and realizes she is not a part of his household but someone who is a foreigner. He asks about her identity and is told she is Ruth the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. The foreman tells Boaz that Ruth has been working hard all day without hardly any rest. Boaz’s response is not predictable. He reveals much of his character in this moment. He not only allows Ruth to continue to work and gather food, but he also provides for her nourishment, water, and protection. All of which are signs of mercy and kindness. When Ruth tells Naomi of her good fortune and meeting Boaz, Naomi rejoices and tells Ruth that she should continue to work in Boaz’s field because of his goodness.

Then the story changes in Chapter 3. Chapter 3 of Ruth is one of the strangest and most ambiguous chapters in the Old Testament. What exactly is Naomi and Ruth’s plan and what happens between Boaz and Ruth is open

to much speculation, but it is safe to say that Naomi sets Ruth about a plan not only to provide for Ruth for a season but for a lifetime. Ruth has been committed to care for Naomi; now, Naomi was returning the concern for Ruth. Naomi was older and she knew that Ruth needed a permanent home where she would be cared for. Naomi places her trust in Boaz and in God’s goodness as she gives Ruth instructions about what she must do. The grain was being collected on the threshing floor; at this time, even the landowner would spend time in the fields night and day to protect his harvest and to finish the work. Naomi knew that Boaz would be at the threshing floor this particular night, so she instructed Ruth to prepare herself to meet Boaz. Now, there is much speculation to the intent of Naomi and Ruth and the events at the threshing floor. Let us let the Bible speak for itself in regards to this story.

Ruth is instructed to bathe, put on perfume, and to put on her best clothes. Bathing and perfume were activities done for two purposes. One was a sexual encounter and the other was marriage. Her best clothes should probably be interpreted to mean her most attractive or seductive clothes. Ruth is told to go down to the threshing floor; after Boaz is full from eating and drinking and a hard day’s work he would lie down to sleep. Ruth was to notice where Boaz laid down to sleep; after he was asleep, she was to go and lay down beside him so he would notice her.

When Boaz awoke in the middle of the night, he was startled to find Ruth there. When Boaz asked who she was, she told him “I am your servant Ruth.” She said “Spread the corner of your garment over me since you are a kinsman-redeemer.” Boaz exclaimed “Blessed are you that you have showed me kindness. You have not run after younger men, whether rich or poor.” He tells her not to fear, for he will do for her all she asks. (3.7-11)

This scene is one of the most cloaked passages of Scripture. Many scholars suggest what we have here is a picture of seduction. Ruth goes and lies down with Boaz and the intent of the story is to suggest some type of seductive encounter. To be sure, there are many reasons to interpret this passage that way. There are three words in particular that have sexual connotations in the Hebrew language that are found in this short passage. In addition, Moabite women were known to be seductive prostitutes, and prostitutes were known to visit the threshing floor during the harvest season, for there they could find provision of food. What really happens is hard to say, but we can find some clues from the reaction of Boaz.

Boaz is startled by her presence and maybe more so by her request. Her request does not seem to be immoral; instead, it is something more substantial. In fact, many scholars suggest what we have here is one bold young woman who had just asked the “man of standing”, Boaz, to marry her. The foreigner, the poor, the outcast, the downtrodden, the servant is asking for the Israelite, the accepted, the rich, the powerful, to include her in his household. The evidence for marriage is found in many words and phrases. The term *to spread the corner of your garment over me* is a symbol of protection and marriage. The fact that Ruth tells him he is a kinsman-redeemer indicates that this is more than a tryst rather a commitment being requested. The fact that Boaz calls her a noble woman tells us that she was different than what would have been expected from a Moabitess. Also, Boaz’s response that Ruth had shown him favor by choosing him instead of someone young, or rich or poor, is a sign that this was about marriage. What are the reasons for marriage? You marry for prestige. You marry the young, another word for a soldier or a person of prestige. You marry for love, even if they are poor. You marry for money if you are poor. Ruth had chosen neither but had chosen Boaz who was her kinsman-redeemer.

Boaz tells Ruth that there is one problem: there is another who is a closer relative. However, if he chooses not to fulfill his role as kinsman-redeemer, then Boaz will surely do it. As the night ends, Ruth leaves with Boaz’s promise of care, with food and provision for her and Naomi, and with her reputation intact, as she is told to leave before the light.

That very day Boaz kept his promise to Ruth. He went to town and found the *goel* or kinsman-redeemer. Boaz presents the situation to the kinsman-redeemer and when he is told of the property and land of Elimelech, his first response is to buy the land and be the kinsman-redeemer. However, when Boaz tells him that this would also include marrying the widow of Mahon, who was Ruth the Moabitess, the response is “I cannot do it for it will endanger my own estate.” The *goel* had to consider all the ramifications of his commitment. He chose to pass on the opportunity. Either he felt his estate could not support his own family plus Naomi and Ruth or he felt that Ruth being a Moabitess could jeopardize his own estate and line in the next generation. Whatever the case, he passes and Boaz marries Ruth. Not only are they married, but the story ends with Obed being born and laid on Naomi’s lap. Naomi has gone from being one who, in her opinion, was abandoned by God to one for whom God was present, for God had given her a descendent. We are told that this small story has a part in God’s greater story, for Obed would be the father of Jesse who would be the father of David. THE END.

What a great story! But what does it have to say to us today? Let me briefly give you two thoughts. I believe that the book of Ruth tells us about the importance of true commitment.

We live in a culture where the word *commitment* has lost much of its meaning. When we speak of commitment, we are usually speaking of short-term agreements or short-term interests, until something changes or something better comes along. The concept of commitment is becoming foreign to us. We live in a culture where we choose participating over joining and the present over the future. We just don’t value commitment like we used to. That is apparent in almost all of our relationships. Whether it is our relationship as husband and wife, as friends, with a church, with each other in the church, or with our work, commitment has lost its meaning.

I love the story of the young man who walked into a card shop looking for an appropriate card for his girlfriend. He asked the store clerk to pick out something for him that would express his very deep sentiment. She picked out the best-selling card and gave it to the young man. It said simply, “To the only girl I have ever loved.” The young man said, “Terrific! Wonderful! I’ll take six of those!”

The story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz reminds us of the importance of commitment and how commitment can make a difference in our lives. I think there are two important qualities to commitment that Ruth teaches us. The first is Ruth reminds us that commitment requires perseverance.

What I mean by perseverance in commitment is something we choose when it is easy and when it is difficult. In the story of Ruth, she has the opportunity to leave her mother-in-law Naomi. No one would blame her. Orpah had left; yet, although it is a tragic scene when all the men die in her family, Ruth makes a vow to Naomi and keeps that vow throughout her life. She keeps that vow when it requires her leaving her own home and going to be a Stranger. She keeps that vow when things are going well in the fields of Boaz. She keeps that vow when she has the opportunity for a future with Boaz. Ruth reminds us that commitment requires perseverance through the many changes in life.

If we think about the most important relationships in our lives, we quickly are made aware that they exist because of perseverance. As a husband and wife, we make the vow to love each other in sickness and in health, in poverty and wealth, in the good and the bad. Too many times we forget those vows we made. We lack the perseverance to keep them. Yet, commitment is really shallow without perseverance.

The same is true with friendships. It is perseverance that makes them last. We have to learn to forgive, grow, and stay committed to friends through the changes of life. In the church we, too, must discover perseverance. A church is a living organism, not just another institution. So the church, which is filled with relationships, will always continue to change and grow. What we need is commitment to Christ and to each other. This commitment will take perseverance.

The other quality of Ruth's commitment is selflessness within relationship. This story is filled with people who make selfless acts. Naomi is going to send away her only family in a selfless act. Ruth remains with Naomi in a selfless act. Ruth cares for Naomi and Naomi for Ruth with one selfless act after another.

I must tell you that I really believe that selfishness and self-centered living is destroying us. I witness relationships, marriages, companies, and churches destroyed by selfishness. I don't think any of us could argue that we – our culture – values self above all else.

Jesus told us that selfishness would destroy us. He said "If you want to save your life, you must lose it or give it away. What does it profit a person to gain everything and yet lose his or her life in the process" (Matthew 16:25-26)? We learn from Jesus that the way to find life is not by holding on to it but by letting it go in acts of selflessness.

Most scholars believe that Ruth is placed in the Bible at the place it is for this reason. The story of Ruth is a story of faithfulness, selflessness, and commitment to what is right, in the middle of the story of Judges whose stories are filled with those who are self-centered, rebellious, and lack commitment to God and each other. Ruth reminds us commitment will require that we put the interest of others before our own.

This brings me to my last thought. The book of Ruth not only teaches us about commitment to each other but God's commitment to us. The book is ultimately about how God is keeping his promise. It is the story of how

God keeps the line of David alive which will ultimately bring to us God's son, Jesus. The story has the tragic turn with the death of Elimelech and his sons. How can God keep his promise when all that is left are three widows? Yet, God continues to be at work. As Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz are faithful, so God is faithful through them; the result is God keeps his promise. God understands commitment.

God's commitment is like that of Ruth's. God perseveres with us. Ruth reminds us that God is committed to us even when we are not committed to God. God continues to love us and work in our lives. God always acts in a selfless way towards us. It is the heart of God displayed in Jesus Christ which reminds us of God's selfless love for us.

John Ortberg tells a story by Bishop Ulmer in his book *When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box*. Ulmer says that at a museum two men were looking at a painting entitled *Checkmate*. In this painting, the two characters are playing chess and one looks like an old man while the other was to depict the devil. One of the men looking at the painting was a champion chess player. The more he looked at the painting the more intrigued he became. He told his companion to go on through the museum because he wanted to look at this painting longer. When the companion returned, the champion chess player said

There is something wrong with this painting and its title. I have studied the chess board in this painting and it is not checkmate. In fact, the King has one more move.

That really is the story of Ruth. In God's selfless and persevering commitment to you and me, there is always one more move. When all seems lost, God has a plan. When the story seems to be coming to an end, God is getting ready to write the next chapter. Ruth is the reminder of God's endless commitment to you and me through Jesus Christ. God is committed to us, and God calls us to be committed to him and to others with a selfless and persevering love. ✨



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