

## For The Love of Ruth

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our redeemer Jesus Christ, amen.

And they all lived happily ever after... (SLIDE) Don't you just love a story with a happy ending? I sure do, and I wish more of our stories had happy endings. So much of the stories in the Bible are filled with bloodshed and treachery, with brother against brother, family against family, and country against country, perhaps that's why I love reading the Book of Ruth so much. It's like an island of tranquility in a sea of violent debauchery. For the most part, people in Ruth's story treat each other well and with honor and loyalty. There's hardly a hint of attempts at genocide, brutal reprisals, disobedience or unfaithfulness toward God or neighbors. On the surface, at least The Book of Ruth seems as soothing as these fun pictures of my favorite species of livestock...

When we discuss books of ancient origin it's important to know the difference between the setting and the date the book was written. In the case of the Book of Ruth, the opening lines state it takes place during the time of the Judges. (SLIDE) This was known to be a time of sever tribal conflict and war between the Children of Israel and their neighboring nations. One of those hated neighbors was the country of Moab and their citizens, the Moabites. Toward the end of the book we learn Ruth was the great Grandmother of King David. Since David is mentioned by name, this gives us a hint that the book was written during or after

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his reign as King of Israel. (SLIDE) Although the date of authorship is still hotly debated among biblical scholars, most believe it was written either toward the end of the exile or after the exile when the Hebrew people were back in their promised land of Judah. If you recall, when the Jewish exiles were granted safe return to rebuild Jerusalem, those who returned after over 60 years in exile discovered their Hebrew relatives who had been left behind intermarried and had children with their wives from foreign countries. (SLIDE) Along with these foreign spouses came foreign gods and foreign worship practices. This greatly upset those who returned from Exile because they had spent the previous 60 plus years keeping their religious faith pure and unsullied by foreign influences, despite living among the pagans of Babylon. They had not married into their captor's families, nor adopted their captors' religious practices or influences.

When these two groups encountered one another you can imagine the controversies and conflicts that erupted. It got so bad the Hebrew people who returned from Babylon demanded their kinsmen divorce their foreign wives and denounce their children from these interfaith marriages. (SLIDE) Can you imagine? You might have 3.5 children in your perfect nuclear family, when these super-religious zealots return like they own the place and require you to give up on the spouse and children you love so much... Maybe a story about a foreign, Moabite woman's faith and loyalty, might help calm the tensions by telling the

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story about how the Hebrew people's greatest king was descended from a foreign woman.

(SLIDE) Nothing like this kind of religious bigotry could possibly be relevant today, right??? I'll start by telling the story of a couple from one of my previous church experiences. I knew a couple where the wife was Lutheran and the husband was Roman Catholic. When the couple first planned their marriage, their families were disappointed to say the least. By the time I came to know them, they had been married for many years. The husband used to get up early in the morning and attend the early mass. Afterward, he would bring his wife to the Lutheran Church so she could Worship according to her faith. Although he brought her nearly every week, he never came into the Lutheran Church. He would drop her off at the door, park his car, and wait for her in the parking lot. At least their families didn't start a feud or require them to divorce...

Now let's see what can happen if religious superiority and bigotry are allowed to fester, unchecked. (SLIDE) Just a week and a day ago, Israel was invaded by members of the Hamas terrorist group. Hamas and other Jihadist terrorist groups seek to kill as many Jews as they are able. They desire and plan for the total annihilation of the Jewish state of Israel. In their blind hatred, these Hamas fighters took over 1200 innocent lives, including women and children.

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Whole families were burned alive, their remains found with them hugging each other in a final embrace as they perished in flames.

As a Christian follower of Jesus Christ, I wish there was another way, besides taking an eye for an eye, but the Words of Jesus seem like so much noise mixed in with the winds of war. The story of Ruth is all the more scandalous because for most of its history, Moab and the Moabites were the sworn enemies of the Israelites. (SLIDE) Now, here's this story about how a Moabite woman unflinchingly unites herself with her Israelite mother-in-law. Her statement, her promise to Naomi is a powerful statement of faithfulness. Not even death would be able to separate Ruth and Naomi. Imagine the scandal... Naomi comes back to her hometown with this, this Moabite woman! Most Jews would probably have wanted to stone her at the gate... Yet, this hated foreigner attracts the love interest of one of Naomi's male relatives named Boaz. (SLIDE) He marries her. They have a son, who has a son named Jesse from whom the branch of Jesse becomes the tree of life and gives forth a son named David. For those of us who trust in the name of Jesus Christ, Ruth is the great grandmother of David whose lineage leads directly to Jesus Christ.

The story of Ruth begins with famine and death, but ends with harvest and new life. In that context, it's a lot like the story of the resurrection. The resurrection necessarily begins with the death of Jesus, but ends with new life, not

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just for Jesus but for all of humanity. This story shows us there is another way.

Our story doesn't have to be filled with death and destruction. Instead of shunning those who are different from us or who may have different faith traditions, maybe we can learn to love them as Boaz loved Ruth or even better as Ruth loved Naomi.

Bitter enemies don't have to remain enemies forever. (SLIDE)

The narrator's portrait of Bethlehem in the concluding scenes of the Book of Ruth offers a vision of a harmonious and joyful community. Boaz ensures that all matters are handled decently and in order; there is uprightness in the meeting at the town gate. The leading man of the Israelite village and the poor Moabite widow are married with the blessing of the community elders and others gathered round. The child of this union is celebrated by the women of the town as he is placed into the arms of Naomi. The continuing bond between Ruth and Naomi is underscored as the women compare Ruth's value to that of seven sons. This portrait of the community is a microcosm of the peaceable kingdom envisioned by the prophets. It's a human community where the marginalized person has dared to insist upon full participation, where the one in the center has reached out beyond societal norms to include the marginalized. It is a community in which children are celebrated and the elderly are attentively cared for. It's a community where all are fed, a community where joy is the dominant note. The Book of Ruth offers us not just a memory of a powerful story from the ancient past, but also a beautiful vision

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of our future hope. This vision of the future can happen when we all begin to live our lives as if God's Will is actually being accomplished on earth as it is in heaven.

When that happens, we will all live happily ever after... (SLIDE)

May we see in Ruth's story not just a story about their love and loyalty, but also the inclusion and acceptance of those who once were once distant strangers and enemies, but are now our family and our friends. May the God of Naomi and Ruth continue to call us into a relationship of faith and love. Amen.