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ne of the most romantic love stories in the world is the story of Ruth.

Ruth is the name of one of the two books in the Bible that bear the name of women. The other is the book of Esther.

Esther was a Jewess who married a gentile. Ruth, by contrast, was a gentile who married a Jew.

The story of Ruth is a three-fold love story. It is the uncommon love story of a daughter-in-law for her mother-in-law; the love of a man for a woman; and the love of God for humanity.

Just a tiny book of less than one hundred verses, the book of Ruth is sandwiched between the book of Judges and the book of 1 Samuel.

Judges is a wild, chaotic historical account. It tells us in the last verse, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Jgs 21:25 NRSV). It's a fierce book, a bloodthirsty book, a book full of war, trouble, and death. (1 Samuel is the story of the development of the kingdom in Israel.)

Judges is a book of failure; and the message is, "When you fail, look for your Deliverer." The book of Ruth tells us about Boaz, who prefigures the greatest Deliverer of all—our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Story of Ruth

The first three chapters of Ruth assure us that the troubles of the righteous are many. The last chapter shows that God delivers the righteous out of all those troubles. The book tells us that life and love lead to God, because life is God's gift; love is God's nature.

Here is how the story begins:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion (Ruth 1:1-2).

This is the story of a Jewish family, squeezed out of the land of promise by famine into a heathen land. They planned only a brief stay, a sojourn, but tragedy struck the family.

The father, Elimelech (which means "My God is King") died. By and by, the sons died (after they had married). Strangely, the sons were called Mahlon and Chilion which mean "sick" and "pinning"—representative of the family's sad experience among the heathen. Only a

mother-in-law and two widows were left.

Ruth 1:6 tells us that the mother-in-law, Naomi, started to return from Moab with her daughters-in-law. She had heard that the Lord had considered his people in Judah and given them food.

Naomi urged Ruth and Orpha, her daughters-in-law, to return to their homes. They had treated her kindly, but she had no security to offer them. "Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people'" (Ruth 1:9-10). Naomi told them she had no more sons for them to marry. The two daughters-in-law lifted up their voices and wept again. One of them, Orpha, kissed Naomi goodbye. But Ruth clung to her.

Naomi and Ruth

Notice the beautiful words of Ruth:

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;

Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,

and more as well,

if even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1:16-17).

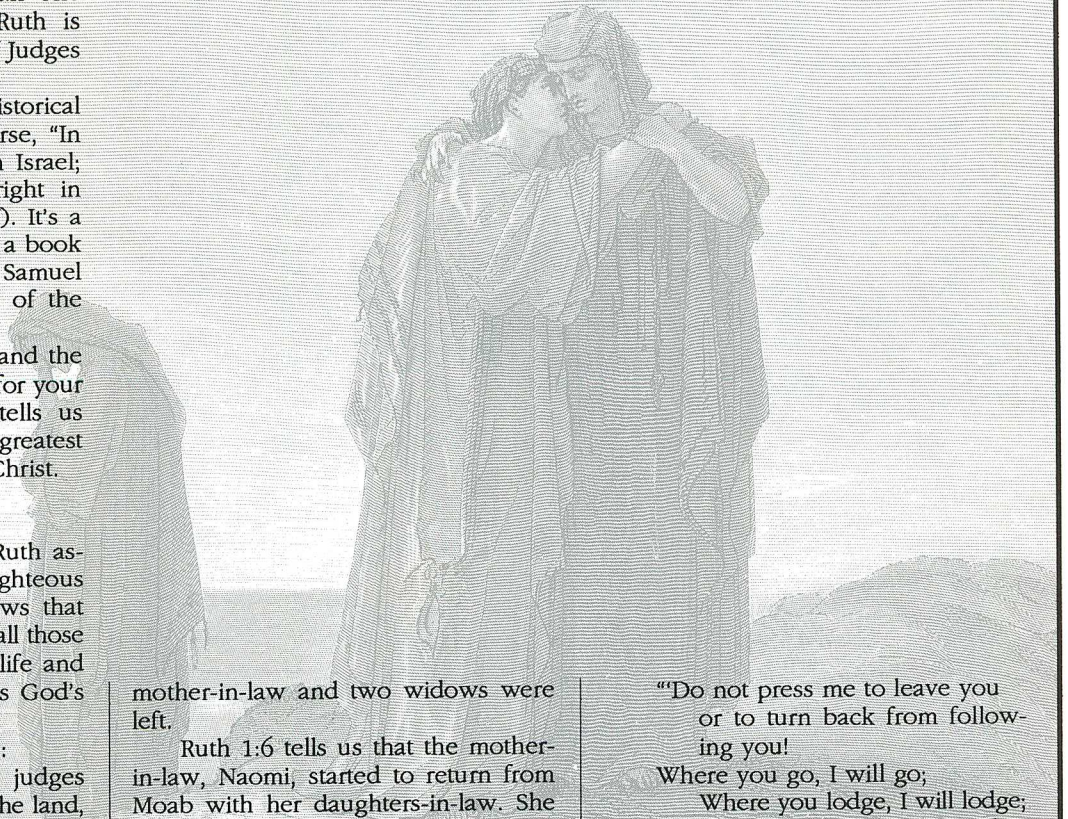
At last Naomi and Ruth come to Bethlehem. The whole town is stirred, and the women say, "Is this Naomi?" (1:19). Naomi means 'pleasant.' "Call me Mara," Naomi responded (v. 20). Mara means "bitter."

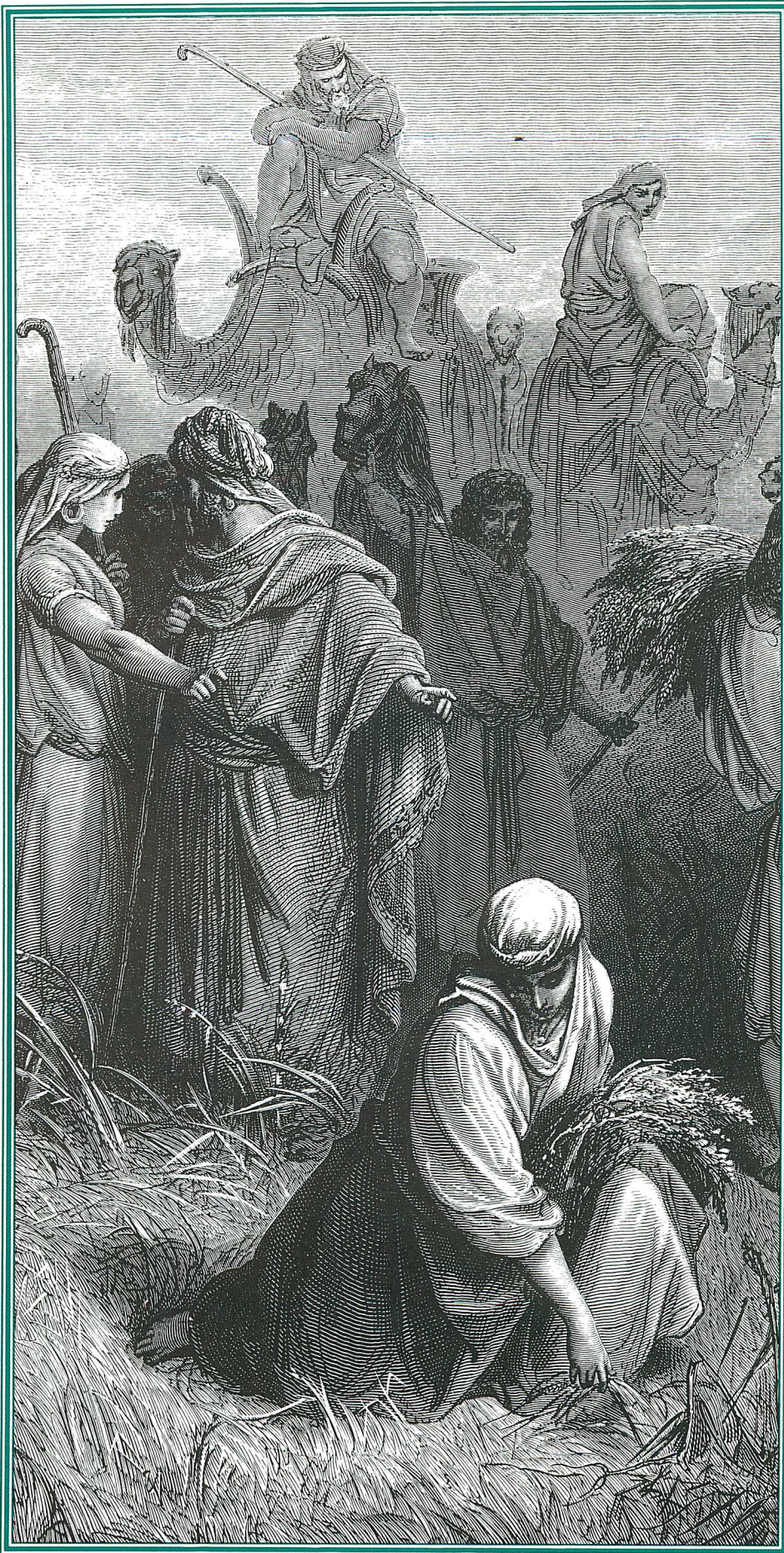
The last verse of chapter 1 tells us, "They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest" (1:22).

Good News About God in the Romance of Ruth

by Desmond Ford

The tender story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz reveals the love of our kinsman-redeemer Jesus





Enter Boaz

In chapter two we read about the hero of the story: Boaz.

"Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz" (2:1).

Boaz arrives from Bethlehem, to check on the reaping of the grain in his field. "He said to the reapers, 'The Lord be with you.' They answered, 'The Lord bless you'" (2:4). He notices Ruth working in his field. (Ruth sought permission from Naomi to go gleaning behind the reapers.) Boaz asks his crew chief who she is, and learns about Ruth and Naomi.

Boaz speaks kindly to Ruth:

"Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women.... I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn" (2:8-9).

Ruth asks why Boaz is so kind to a foreigner. He explains he has heard about the loving care she has shown for widowed Naomi; and her sacrifice in leaving her homeland. He says, "May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" (2:12). Ruth is deeply impressed with his kindness.

Boaz then invites her to eat with his workers. He personally makes sure she gets enough. "Boaz instructed his young men, 'Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean'" (2:15-16).

As a result, Ruth gleaned about an ephah of barley that day [about 30-lb or eleven two-liter plastic pop bottles-Editor]. Naomi was delighted, especially when Ruth told her about Boaz. "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin" Naomi said.

Kinsman-Redeemer

The story increases in significance when we find that Boaz is actually a kinsman-redeemer.

The Old Testament laws made provision for widows. A male, near relative could buy back the lost property of the dead husband. Simultaneously, he could marry the widow and thus redeem both property and person.

Ruth's story is now revealing that, suddenly, this lonely, heathen young woman, in exile, suffering from widowhood, want, and woe, has found a kinsman-redeemer.

Naomi's Advice

In the third chapter, Naomi gives Ruth advice:

"My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do" (3:1-5).

This advice sounds strange to us in the western world, but it alludes to very ancient customs of the East. Even today, if an orthodox Jew marries a girl of his choice, he throws the end of his robe—his talith—over his shoulders.

Naomi has selected the time when Boaz and his men will be resting on the harvest floor. Then, in relative privacy, Ruth is to ask Boaz if he wants to redeem her or not. Here is the real significance of the story.

Ruth did as her mother-in-law advised. Boaz, having eaten, lies down at the end of a heap of grain. Ruth comes softly and uncovers his feet, and lies down. She takes the position of servant, crosswise at his feet. "At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman!" (3:8).

Boaz asks who she is, and Ruth tells him, urging him to spread his cloak over her, for he is the "one with the right to redeem" (3:9 footnote).

Boaz replies:

"May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman" (3:10-11).

He then explains that there is, "another kinsman more closely related than I." Boaz must yield to him. But if, in the morning, he will not act on Ruth's behalf, then Boaz will. He then urges Ruth to lie down and rest.

The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth

The next morning, Boaz goes to the gate. He speaks to the next-of-kin he told Ruth about. Boaz then summons ten of the elders of the city, and they all sit and listen to Boaz. Boaz urges the

next-of-kin to redeem Elimelech's property. The next-of-kin says he will. Boaz reminds him he is also acquiring Ruth, the widow. The next-of-kin says he cannot do that, and relinquishes his right of redemption to Boaz.

This is what Boaz has been working for. He claims redemption rights, and takes Ruth as his wife. The witnesses say, "May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel" (4:11). Obed is born to the married couple and the women say to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him" (4:14-15).

The story closes with the mother-in-law. "Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse" (4:16).

Ancestor of David

The last verses of the book of Ruth tell us that the child of Ruth and Boaz was an ancestor of David. This is a clue to the real meaning of the book.

The burden of every book and every chapter of Scripture is redemption: the solving of the great human problem of sin, exile, loss, and death.

The book of Ruth, which tells us about David, the ancestor of our Lord, Jesus Christ; which tells us about the town of Bethlehem, the birthplace of our Lord; which discusses the time of harvest which is also Passover season—this book is your story and mine.

Ruth Is Us

Ruth represents every one of us. Ruth was a heathen. According to Deuteronomy 23:3, "No ... Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation none of their descendants shall be admitted" By law, they were shut out; and Ruth represents us all.

By law we have no right to the kingdom of God. We have no claim on heaven. Scripture says that by nature we are aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenant of promise, without God and without hope in the world (Eph 2:12). The carnal mind is enmity against God, not subject to the law of God, and neither can it be (Rom 8:7). All have sinned; and all have come short of the glory of God—and the wages of sin is death (Rom 3:23; 6:23).

So, by law, like Ruth, we are prohibited from the blessings of the people

of God. But, thank God, there is more than Ruth in this story. There is also Boaz.

The Goodness of Boaz

Boaz is the lord of the harvest. Boaz means, "In him, strength." Boaz is the one who is powerful and rich. He is compassionate and kind. He is concerned about Jews, like Naomi, and gentiles like Ruth.

Boaz provides for all. He gives gifts. He welcomes the outcast, and comforts her. He redeems her. He works for her benefit. He provides her with his robe and covers her. He redeems her fully and completely; he unites himself with her in marriage, that she might bring forth fruit.

Boaz is the picture of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Our Kinsman-Redeemer

The story says Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer. Our Christ, though once his garment was the light and the stars of heaven were the fringe of his robe; though he was the One who put the blaze in the sun and the twinkle in the stars; though he made the planets and the brooks and whirling worlds and luminous suns; though he made humanity, the birds, and the fish of the sea—became a child in the stable at Bethlehem.

Jesus became our true near kinsman. He took unfallen human nature and added it to his own. Christ was one person with two natures. Jesus was just as much God as though not at all human; just as much human as though not at all God. Divine, he had power to help us; human, he could represent us.

So Boaz represents Jesus, the true lord of the harvest. Jesus is indeed powerful and rich; indeed compassionate and kind. Jesus is concerned about both Jews and gentiles. Jesus provides for all. Jesus welcomes the outcast.

The True Boaz

You may lack all earthly friends, but Jesus loves you. You may not be understood by your husband, your wife, your parents, or your children. Your neighbors may not understand you. But Jesus does.

Jesus knows the reasons behind the problems in your day-to-day existence. He knows the battles you have fought, the agonies you have borne. Jesus knows the warring desires of your heart, the mixed motives that actuate you. He knows; he understands—and he loves you just the same.

Jesus is the true Boaz. He wants to redeem us to himself. He bought us at Calvary.



What We Must Do

Chapter three told us of Ruth washing, anointing, putting on her best clothes, then lying at Boaz's feet in a posture of surrender to her kinsman-redeemer. That is a picture of what we must do, my friends.

We need to go to our Lord, kneel before him, and plead for his robe of righteousness.

Ruth acted at Passover time. It was when Boaz lay down to rest that the union was proposed. When our Lord Jesus died on the cross, the way was made for our union with him forever!

Rest

The key word of the story is **rest**. Naomi told her daughters-in-law that she could not provide rest for them. Only a redeemer could; they each needed a husband who would unite himself with them.

It was only when Naomi at last asked, "My daughter, shall I not seek rest for thee?" (Ruth 3:1 KJV) that Ruth, the alien, was brought into crucial contact with the kinsman-redeemer. When Ruth returned home, Naomi assured her, "The man will not rest, but will settle the matter [of Ruth's redemption] today" (Ruth 3:18 NRSV). And so it was.

You and I seek rest of soul, rest of heart, rest of spirit. We can only gain it through Christ. Jesus did not rest until he finished our redemption.

Ourself in Scripture

As you read the Scripture, always look for yourself, and always look for Jesus.

We are there and he is there. In Ruth's story we have the outline of our own destiny—if we will choose to have it so.

The first chapter tells of a decision for Christ: when the alien leaves the world of the past, leaves hedonism for the promised land—it takes decision.

In chapter two we read of a meeting with the redeemer. That is essential, my friends. We need to meet our Lord Jesus Christ and kneel before him, to plead for his robe of righteousness. He will surely give it.

In chapter three we have a resting in the redeemer. Not only a kneeling and surrender, but a resting.

In chapter four, there is a union with the redeemer.

That is the way of salvation: decision, meeting, resting, union.

Do not be afraid to come to Christ. We noticed how kind and how thoughtful Boaz was. He even ordered his reapers to drop handfuls purposely, so Ruth would not go home to her mother-in-

law empty-handed. Boaz protected Ruth; was compassionate and sympathetic. Boaz, Ruth's kinsman-redeemer, represents our kinsman-redeemer.

Another Kinsman

There is in the story of Ruth another redeemer, who is not able to save Ruth. He is another kinsman (Ruth 3:12).

He represents our fellowman.

Our fellow human beings are nearer to us by ties of nature than even Jesus; but, they cannot redeem us. All human counsel is powerless to rid us of our sins: of their guilt or power.

It has to be Christ, and Christ alone, who redeems us. It is Christ we must seek; and to Christ we must cleave.

Ruth a Type

Ruth is a type of sinner who goes to the house of the Lord. She is a stranger who finds the grace of the Lord. She is a daughter who finds the love of the Lord; a gleaner who follows his word; a worshiper who falls at his feet; a handmaiden who feeds at his table; a bride who finishes his plan.

There is no fruit in the life until we unite with Christ. He bids us come, whatever the past, however troubled the future may look, however weak we feel, however foolish we have been. Christ is rich and powerful and kind. He has already slept the sleep of death that he might purchase us for eternal life.

If we plead for his robe, then we will become one with him. Fruitfulness in our life will be spontaneous. Life will become a song.

The story of Ruth is not just a story of the love of a daughter-in-law for her mother-in-law. Nor is it just the story of the love of a man for a woman. It is the story of God's love for you.

Life and love lead to God, for life is God's gift, and love is God's nature.

Appeal

If you have not come to God before, my friend, will you come today? God will not turn you away. "I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy" (Mt 12:31). "Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away" (Jn 6:37).

And when you come, God says, "I will not fail you or forsake you" (Jos 1:5). "Come to me, all of you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). ❖

[This study is available on cassette tape. Order GNU #38 "The Romance of Ruth" from GNU, 11710 Education Street, Auburn, CA 95603-2499. Suggested donation \$4.00.]