



November 8, 2015  
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*The Story: Finding the Scarlet Thread*  
*The Faith of a Foreign Woman*  
Ruth

We come this week to the book of Ruth, and frankly, it's a relief! The last few weeks of the Story have been harsh. The wilderness wanderings, the bloody battles, and then last week, Judges! A 400-year repeating cycle of rebellion, punishment, repentance and restoration and rebellion again. Remember that last disappointing line in Judges? "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

But this week we turn the page and come to a short, sweet book: Ruth. It takes place during the time of the Judges. It is a rare Bible book written from the perspective of a woman about a woman. If Judges was a TV series, it would be on Spike TV. But Ruth is Hallmark Channel all the way... right after "Murder She Wrote." But at first glance, you might wonder, "Why is this book even in here? What's it for?" Ahhh, by the time you come to the last few verses of Ruth, not only will its purpose be clear... the Scarlet Thread will be pulsating before your eyes.

The story begins with Naomi. Her name means "Pleasant" or "Sweet" and at the start, her life is sweet. She's married to Elimelech, they have two strapping boys and life is chugging right along... until suddenly, a terrible famine strikes the land. I walked through Haggen's Grocery Store the other day and it was so sad. This beautiful store, shelves empty, about to be closed because of a series of colossal screw ups, and I remember thinking, "What if this were the only grocery store in town. What would we do?"

When Naomi went shopping, there was nothing on the shelves. Not because Safeway was forced out, but because of famine. So Elimelech makes the tough decision to leave town, which meant abandoning their chunk of the Promised Land. But they had no choice... not if they wanted to survive.

So off they went to Moab. Moab sits on the east side of the Dead Sea, and these guys weren't allies. After the Israelites left Egypt, they asked Moab for some food and water. They refused. That explains what we find in Deuteronomy 23:3: "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation." That is a long memory!

Then there was that little incident with the fat Moabite king, Eglon, assassinated with a sword to the belly. And to make it worse, the Moabites worshiped

bloodthirsty Molech, the hollow bronze god with outstretched arms. You built a fire inside until the idol was red hot, and then you placed your babies in Molech's arms as a sacrifice. Moab was an awful, inhospitable place, but they had food. So Elimelech and his family left their little corner of the Promised Land and headed for Moab.

It must have been hard for Naomi, but she had her family so everything would be okay. Then Elimelech got sick and died. Suddenly, Naomi is a widow, a single mom, in a foreign land. But that's okay, she still had her boys! They met and married two young Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Naomi might not have been thrilled with Moabite daughters-in-law, but she grew to love them. Then, more tragedy struck. Both of her sons died... childless.

So, husband gone, both sons gone, stuck in a foreign land, Naomi is devastated and decides to go home. Orpah and Ruth offer to go with her, but she says no: "Stay here, get married again, have children. There's no reason for you to come with me." Orpah turns around, but not Ruth. Ruth loves Naomi and right there, in chapter one, we read perhaps the most inspirational statement of faithfulness ever spoken. Listen:

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. <sup>17</sup>Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."<sup>18</sup>When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So together they return to the Promised Land. Naomi's village was tiny, so when she walked up, the people ran out to greet her. But there must have been something about her that looked different, broken, perhaps, because when they saw her, they exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" She heard them and uttered these plaintive words:

<sup>20</sup>"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. <sup>21</sup>I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

"Don't call me 'Pleasant' any more. There is nothing pleasant about my life. From now on, I have a new name. Call me 'Bitter!'" Wow! You can hardly blame her. She loses her land, her husband, her sons. She has no heirs, no future, no legacy... only loss... only bitterness. Oh, and one remarkably faithful Moabite daughter-in-law named Ruth. Which is a lot, as it turns out!

It was harvest time so Ruth offered to go out to the fields and follow the gleaners, picking up scraps they had left behind. It just so "happens" that she picks the field

of a man named Boaz, Naomi's relative. Boaz notices Ruth. He has heard of her faithfulness to Naomi, and despite the fact that Ruth is a foreigner he treats her kindly. He warns her to stay on his land where she will be safe. He even tells his workers to drop a few extra sheaves of barley so she has more to pick up.

When Ruth returns home and reports to Naomi, a light bulb goes off in her head. Naomi concocts a scheme—frankly, a weird scheme—to cause old Boaz to fall for Ruth. You can read the details, but the plan works. And here we are introduced to a defining term in Ruth, which appears over 20 times in this little book: “kinsman-redeemer” or, as the Story translates it, “guardian-redeemer.” Let me explain.

Slavery was a harsh reality of the time. You could become a slave by being taken captive in battle. But for some, crisis struck and you had to sell your land, and eventually sell yourself into slavery in order to survive. In our history, we called that indentured servitude. If things worked out, after many years, you could regain your freedom.

But there was another way. If you had a relative who was willing to pay the price, your freedom could be purchased. This relative was called a “kinsman redeemer.” Boaz was blown away that beautiful young Ruth would be willing to marry an old guy like him—just the way I felt when my child bride, Cyndi, agreed to marry me! For Ruth and Naomi, it would mean a new life: someone who could buy and maintain their ancestral land, someone to care for and protect them, someone to provide an heir so that their family name would not die out. Boaz was game.

Only one problem: he wasn't next in line. There was another relative who had the first right of refusal. So Boaz goes to him and says, “You have the right to redeem Naomi's land. Are you interested?” “Yes,” the guy replies. “Okay, but one little wrinkle. You also have to marry her daughter-in-law, Ruth. It's a package deal.” “Whoa, that won't work! It will mess up my estate planning.” “Okay,” Boaz says, “then you'll give me permission to marry Ruth and redeem the land?” And so the deal was done. And you know how they sealed the deal? They exchanged shoes. We shake hands. They traded sandals. I know... weird!

So Boaz marries Ruth, they have a child. Naomi gets her grandson and her ancestral land restored with an heir. And they live happily ever after. See what I mean? A sweet, tender story, but what is it here for? Why did God tuck this little book into his Word?

Two reasons: first, it teaches us about “hesed.” You all know one Hebrew word. Shalom. Here's your second. Hesed. It means “loving kindness” or “unfailing love” or “steadfast love.” It describes God's faithfulness. After God delivered his people through the Red Sea, “Moses sang these words, “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed Ex 15.13.” “Hesed.” In Psalm 103:8, when we read, “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” “Hesed.”

Hesed is not the love of emotional feeling. It is a love of action... of kindness. Hesed does not depend upon the response of the one who receives it. Hesed depends upon the faithfulness of the one who gives it. Any of you remember the New Testament Greek word for God's love? Agape. "For God so loved the world—"agaped" the world—that he sent his only son... To suffer. To die. To redeem." Agape is sacrificial, giving love in the New Testament. Hesed is the same thing in the Old Testament... Old Testament agape.

Hesed is kindness. When Naomi tries to send her daughters-in-law back, she says: "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness—Hesed—to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me." When Boaz praises Ruth for her kindness to him and to Naomi, he says, "The LORD bless you, my daughter. This kindness, hesed, is greater than that which you showed earlier."

Ruth is the epitome of hesed: faithful, kind, never-give-up, no-matter-what-comes-along—hesed. Remember her words to Naomi? "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. <sup>17</sup>Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried." What kind of love is this? "I will leave my people and be with you. I will leave behind our gods and follow your God. I will stay true to you until one of us breathes her last." Isn't that remarkable?

Can I tell you why it's even more remarkable? Because I don't think Naomi was very pleasant to live with. Do you remember her name change? "Mara." Bitter! "My name used to be 'Pleasant.' But don't call me that anymore. Call me "Bitter" because that is what my life has become." No doubt her life was hard, but there are some people who go through such pain, and somehow they allow God to work through that pain... to shape them, to deepen them, to sweeten them. And then there are those who surrender to bitterness... like Naomi. (Maybe even like some here, by the way!)

Doesn't it say all the more about Ruth's character that she showed hesed—unending, faithful, kindness—to a woman who had given herself the nickname, "Bitter!"

This world needs more hesed. Our relationships need more hesed. Our marriages need more hesed. We all take marriage vows of "til death do us part," but most don't really mean it. What we mean is, "Until death—or until someone better comes along—or until you irritate me... or bore me... or don't meet my needs... or become unattractive to me... or get sick." Hesed means, "I will be faithful to you no matter how grumpy, frumpy, bumpy, bitter, difficult or disappointing you might become. I will show you kindness no matter how you respond to my kindness."

We live in a flipping culture. We flip houses, flip marriages, flip relationships, flip churches, flip religions. The idea of hesed—of enduring, faithful, kindness regardless

of the response—is not only counter-cultural, it is viewed as foolish. If you live a life of hesed, the world says you are a sucker. But in God's eyes you aren't.

And that's the other reason this book has been given to us, because we discover God's hesed toward us in so many ways. We find God's hesed toward the outsider. Ruth, a Moabitess, is invited into God's family— amazing. But more than that, do you know who Boaz's mother was? Rahab! Remember the prostitute from Jericho who saved the Hebrew spies!? The son of a pagan prostitute marries a pagan enemy of Israel, and in God's hesed, they play a pivotal role in the redemptive story. There they were, living out their lives in their hometown... oh, did I forget to mention the name of that town? Bethlehem! And there in Bethlehem, Boaz and Ruth have a son, "And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David."

Remember the last verse of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel." Ah, but a king is coming! A king born in Bethlehem—David, yes—but another after him: the Kinsman-Redeemer, our brother who will come and pay the price of our slavery, who will purchase our freedom. Jesus, the King of Bethlehem, is the ultimate expression of God's hesed—enduring, unending, loving kindness. Despite our response, despite our bitterness, despite our wickedness, despite the ways we have sold ourselves into slavery... God sends our Kinsman-Redeemer anyhow. Hesed.

Are you kind? It's one of the fruit of the Spirit, you know. Are you kind... enduringly kind to your bitter mother-in-law or your inattentive spouse or your unreasonable parents or your disappointing child or your outrageous boss? I realized this week, that I have been unkind to someone. He made me mad; it doesn't matter what he did, but I was convicted to reach out in kindness to my friend. We show hesed, not because they deserve it or because it is easy, but because we have a God who has shown us hesed.

Last weekend I spoke hard words. True words, I believe, but hard. As followers of Christ, we need to stand against the lies of this culture; the moral relativism that says, "You have your truth, I have my truth." We need to stand for God's eternal truth. But it is easy for Christians to use truth as a bludgeon. This message is Part II to last week's message. Jesus didn't tell us, "They will know you by our truth." He said, "They will know you by your love." It is this love—hesed: unending, enduring, gracious kindness—even toward those who revile us that will bear witness to the truth of our words. When we are kind even to those with whom we vehemently disagree, that is how we gain a hearing for the King of Bethlehem.

So I'll ask it again, are you kind? Let's pray for God's hesed.