

**The Short Story of Ruth  
A Brief Survey and Overview of the Book**

This morning I will be talking about the story of Ruth. Our minds are full of different stories aren't they? Who could forget about Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, and the legendary lumberjack who was faster, taller, stronger, and more skilled than any other. Forty bowls of porridge would only whet his appetite. He had a huge skillet for his morning pancakes. Bunyan and his blue pet ox, Babe, created the 10,000 great lakes by merely walking through Minnesota together. When dragging his axe behind him, Bunyan created the Grand Canyon. His favorite pipe was carved out of the largest redwood he could find to cut down.

He should work for Lee's Bees, and looks like he could be related to Nate Walters.

This is a tall tale and there are plenty more like it (Pecos Bill, Johnny Appleseed, John Henry, etc). A tall tale is considered a special kind of story because the heroes are larger than life. They are a stretch for the imagination. They are bigger or stronger than real people, even when the tall tale is based on a real person. Tall-tale heroes solve problems in funny ways that are hard to believe. And exaggeration is the major element in tall tales.

For our time this morning we will be examining the book of Ruth. It is a short story and has characters, a plot, development, a scene, a setting, and even romance. It is based on real people and extraordinary things happen.

But there is so much more to this story that lies deep within the narrative! It is the farthest thing from a ridiculous tall tale. It is not written in a way to merely stimulate our imagination about a made-up story line and fictional characters. It is truth! Objective, eternal, weighty, convicting, encouraging, instructive, divine truth. It is the very Word of God, breathed out from His mouth containing life. The God and Creator Who spoke the universe into existence, and the Lord and Savior of His people breathed life into this short story to be written for Israel three and one-half thousand years ago, and for those who would hear and believe today.

The implications of this story run deep into every corner of our hearts. The major themes to the book of Ruth will be the highlight of our morning, coming up out of the text like the sun rising into a dark valley.

Let us pray that our darkened minds may be enlightened and renewed by the truth of the Word.

So, first of all, why Ruth? We are just flying back over the Old Testament and parachuting down into the pages of Ruth? What brings us here and why? Well, there are some very important reasons why we will be going through this book.

First, we all know that we are in an economic crisis. It is not the first. People during the Old Testament also experienced famine, drought, and the wilderness (and we call 2008-2009 hard). So, in a time of economic downturn, financial disaster, and the rough and rocky bottom for many of us, when nothing seems to be secure or sure, may we look to the book of Ruth during a similar instance when Israel was faced with a severe famine in the land, and may we see how God extended His grace against all odds and beyond all hope to His people.

Second, for those of you who feel like God could never forgive you for who you are and what you have done, may we look to the book of Ruth in which God illustrates how the most unlikely person may be saved and in fact become instrumental for His purposes. The very nature and definition of God's grace puts emphasis on what God is able to do, not you.

Thirdly, for those in the church asking what it takes to be that man of God, or a godly woman, may we look to the book of Ruth and find two portraits of moral excellence and quality character before God. Answering **Proverbs 31:10**, “**An excellent wife** [virtuous woman] **who can find?**” We find Ruth.

Also, Valley Bible Church has a motto, “Teaching the Bible Cover to Cover.” It is born from our understanding of **Acts 20:27**, I think, which says, “**For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God**” and **2 Timothy 3:16-17**, which says, “**All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, (17) that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.**”

All Scripture is profitable. There is no canon within the canon. There are no more important or more inspired books within the Bible itself. So, may we look to the book of Ruth for teaching, reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness, for that is exactly why the book of Ruth was written. You can expect to be made more competent and equipped for every good work as a result of going through this book.

What I would like to do first as we approach Ruth is attempt to set the scene in which this short story takes place. The first words of the book of Ruth set the scene, “In the days when the judges ruled.” To find out what these “days” were like, let’s look at the verse just before this one. That’s right, **Judges 21:25**. Judging by the last verse of Judges, things weren’t going well at all. **“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25)**. What do you think it means to do what is right in your own eyes? Another way of saying it is do and get what you want, and don’t let anyone hold you back (no limits immorality). There was no moral gauge (Law).

So, “doing what was right in their own eyes” was equivalent to “doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”

The dark period of Judges ends with Israel having “no king,” while Ruth ends (**4:22**) with a genealogy (list of names) ending with King David. So there is something pretty magnificent that happens during the book of Ruth that brings hope to the children of Yahweh.

King David, who will rule Israel well as a “man after God’s own heart,” was Ruth’s great grandson. But more importantly, there is another king that is coming from this lineage. The King of Kings, Jesus Christ, comes from this family, all because a Moabitess converted and sought redemption in Yahweh.

So hopefully you get a sense for where we are in history, and in Scripture. These are just some reference points that deeply impact our interpretation of the book of Ruth.

The reason why I’m not going to get into chapter 1 just yet is because the short story of Ruth is unique in its style and structure. I believe it deserves to be, at first, looked at as a complete story. We will read through one part and

it will miss the desired purpose that the skilled, unknown writer was going for.

The purpose of this book has to do mainly with the sovereignty of God. From start to finish, this book points to the sovereign rule of God in His children's lives. Let me give you my definition:

### God's Sovereignty

God's sovereignty has to do with His infinite wisdom, complete control, and authoritative rule over all His creation for His divine purposes. It points to God being all-powerful or omnipotent. He is the Sovereign King and the heavens and the earth are His subject dominion.

Did Naomi believe that God is sovereign?

In chapter 1, things seemed pretty bleak at best. There is a famine in the land (1:1). Naomi's husband Elimelech dies (1:3). Naomi's two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, die (1:5). Naomi feels like there is no hope (1:12). Naomi felt that the "hand of the Lord has gone out against her" (1:13).

She was probably hurting more than any of us would know how to empathize. However Ruth's words in **verses 16-17** show that the Lord is up to something. We see Ruth's amazing confession of faith in Yahweh, **"For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."**

This is a radical commitment! Commitment to the grave! The next 3 chapters go on to show the sovereign plan of God unfold right before Naomi, who had at first thought that His hand was completely against her.

Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem and Naomi is openly bitter towards the Lord (1:20). There is no male headship in the family to perpetuate their family name, keep their land, and provide for the family. Sounds like a trial of all trials.

But in chapter 2, Ruth meets a man named Boaz. They “connect” in the fields and Boaz hears all that has happened to the family. He also hears of Ruth’s commitment to Naomi and confession of faith to Yahweh. Because of this, he says in **2:12** to Ruth, **“The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!”**

The once embittered Naomi, hears of the news of a redeemer, and is now ecstatic with hope. Her whole demeanor changes and she says in **2:20**, **“May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!”** So she has her focus realigned.

Naomi in the beginning of Ruth was textbook not trusting in God. And God was abundantly gracious to her in granting a redeemer in Boaz. She found it easy to lose her faith and trust in Yahweh when hard times came.

Have you ever felt that it was hard to trust God with something?

Let us remember that our God is sovereign. He is infinite in wisdom, knowing exactly what His children need. He is in complete control, even when it looks like life is spinning out of control. And He is the ruler of earth with all authority, and nothing frustrates His sovereign plan.

**Psalm 115:3, “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”**

**Job 2:10, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?”**

**Isaiah 46:9b–10** says, **“For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”**

God’s sovereignty is what the book of Ruth is all about. Ruth takes initiative in **chapter 2**, Naomi takes initiative in **chapter 3**, and Boaz takes initiative in **chapter 4**, yet none of them can be said to be the person that the book is written about. God is watching over His people, and He is bringing to pass what is good on earth.

## God's Providence

God's providence is closely related to His sovereignty. It is another major theme of Ruth.

“God's providence is His constant care for and His absolute rule over all His creation for His own glory and the good of His people.” (Jerry Bridges in *Trusting God*) Essentially, God's providence combines His sovereignty and His goodness. He is our Good Shepherd and He is the Praiseworthy King. He is our loving Father and He is our Sovereign God.

In **chapter 2**, Ruth goes to glean in the field behind the reapers, and in **verse 3** it says, **“and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz.”** This is another way of saying, “As luck would have it” but with the knowledge that it is just as God would have it. Ruth could have gone to glean in any field. She is poor; that is why she is gleaning. She could have never seen any owner of a field. The owner of the field could have been unkind and kicked her out (not so! **v. 20**). This is the right time, the right place, the perfect crossroads—God's providence.

The fact of the matter is we encounter difficulty all the time. But what we must understand is that under the fatherly providence of God, bereavement, disease, accident, poverty, disappointment, and disaster may become blessing. No doubt they bring serious hurt and loss, but God always has a more important purpose and gain for us in it. And the ultimate advantage of trusting in God will be spiritual in nature rather than material.

The ways of God are not always evident on the surface, but there is always a goodness to His purpose of grace that is revealed in time or eternity. As a line of an old hymn puts it, “Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.”

Don't forget that He is completely sovereign, infinite in wisdom, perfect in love. He is continually active. Cling to these truths.

## Godly Individuals

Both Boaz and Ruth are referred to as “worthy” (ESV). Boaz is “a worthy man” (**2:1**). Later on, after Boaz had gotten to know Ruth, he says in **3:11**,

**“I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.”** It is the same attribute for both. This is a worthy couple.

Literally, the Hebrew terms for Boaz in **2:1** means, “mighty in strength” or “great in wealth.” This expression may also mean that he was “qualified, of right character, of nobility, honor, and sterling character.”

The same is mentioned of Ruth in **3:11**. When the Hebrew word is used in reference to a woman, it means that Ruth was an “excellent woman, virtuous.”

A “worthy man” (2:1) and a “worthy woman” (3:11) are those who are more concerned about serving others than serving themselves, despite the more than difficult times. Their service to the Lord is characterized by loyal love and kindness towards those in need.

In the book of Ruth, each character is looking out for the others’ good, and not their own. For instance, Ruth wants what is best for her mother-in-law Naomi, by remaining devoted to her and gleaning in the fields for her. Naomi wants what is best for her daughter-in-law Ruth, in preparing her to go back to Boaz to marry him and to take him as her husband. And Boaz wants what is best for both of them, Ruth and Naomi, in bringing redemption to their family, allowing them to keep their land, removing shame and bearing blessing from Yahweh and others.

This is a beautiful picture of what relationships should look like among the redeemed people of God. Just imagine a church full of individuals who were more concerned about what is best for others than just wanting to serve themselves!

This sounds exactly like Christ’s words in **Matthew 22:37-39** when He said, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** And if you think the characters in Ruth weren’t aware of these words, think again! Christ is quoting **Deuteronomy 6:5** and **Leviticus 19:18**. All Israel knew these great commands!

How does this look like at Valley? Needs being met, pure motives, sacrificial service, etc.

### God's Redemptive Plan

Redemption has to do with “deliverance, ransom.” It is the release, or freeing, by the payment of a price. There are 23 uses of the Hebrew word for “redemption” in Ruth. It is replete/full of the topic of redemption. Naomi and Ruth had lost absolutely everything. Impoverished. Hurt. Broken. Stripped. Hopeless...or so it seemed. They had lost their family, so they had no one to lean on and seek help from in this time of dire need. That is why Naomi becomes so ecstatic once she learns about Boaz taking an interest in Ruth (**2:19–20**)! Because she knows they're related (God's providence!).

In the story of Ruth, there are two things being redeemed, or purchased back with a price: “all that belonged to Elimelech and his sons” and “Ruth the Moabitess” (**4:9-10**). By redeeming Naomi's property back for her, and taking Ruth as his bride and providing an heir for the dead husband, Boaz stands as a type of what our redemption is like before God in Christ. He is a picture and a symbol of the relationship that we have with Jesus, our Redeemer.

And this is the very heart of the gospel of God's grace. Like **Colossians 1:13-14** says, **“He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”**

My hope is that as you read the short story of Ruth, you won't just put it on the shelf next to some phony tall tales.

My hope is that your mind would understand the magnitude and relevance of the rich truths that God pours forth from this story.

My prayer is that each and every one of us would be able to trust God for He is trustworthy.

Let's celebrate the redemption that we have in Christ now.