



YEAR 3—The God Who Pursues Relationship: A Story of God's People

Module 4: God Leads His People

Lesson 2: Israel and Foreigners—Ruth 1-4

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

(A theological and biblical reflection on today's Scripture passage.)

GOD'S STORY

Ruth, as both a book and a person, teaches us that God's grace can appear unexpectedly to people in the midst of suffering. Ruth was a non-Jew from Moab who was alive during the closing days of the Judges, a 400 year period of chaos when prophetic deliverers were raised up to guide the people back to the Lord. Among these epic leaders were Gideon, Deborah and Samson. It was a dark era when everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes (Judges 17:6).

What makes Ruth's story even more tragic is that she married as a foreigner into a Jewish family where all the men suddenly died. Instead of returning back to her original home, she chose to stay with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi and experience the full consequences of the loss with her. Even as Naomi became resentful toward God, Ruth joined her in a journey back to her Jewish homeland as a destitute woman.

This in itself is a huge statement of trust in God, especially by Ruth, who had no roots in this faith, and Naomi, who felt broken by loss. The women recognized this wasn't the end of their lives and by trusting in a relationship with the Lord they might see a better end to things. Naomi made sure this was Ruth's true heart on the matter before they left, for there was no additional brother of the deceased sons who could take her in and become responsible for her according to Jewish custom.

Neither woman had any idea how greatly the Lord would bless them for returning back together in faith. Boaz, a Jewish relative, was used by God as a type of savior in the situation. By making sure they had food each day and eventually taking Ruth as his wife, he reached out across the lines of what was expected to display a redemptive heart. Boaz paid a debt he didn't owe for someone he could have turned his back on. Instead, he made Ruth one of his own and they faced the future together. The actions of Boaz were a foreshadowing of what Christ did for us on the cross.

This is nothing short of scandalous grace, for Deuteronomy 23:3-6 is clear, "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, even down to the tenth generation... do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live." Ruth was an "illegal immigrant" culturally and spiritually who would traditionally be excluded from the blessings and people of Israel; however, Boaz showed kindness to her and in doing so showed the fuller Spirit of the Law that Jesus would ultimately fulfill by first coming for the Jews and then extending ministry to non-Jews.

OUR STORY

It's tempting to think we can move away from our problems just like Naomi's family did early on when the famine hit. The problem is we often bring our problems with us and force the same issues to continue in a different place. We may even believe, as Naomi did, that God's hand is against us no matter where we go.

Our relationship with God is larger than that and transcends geography. On one hand, He is with us wherever we are; on the other hand, when we are a foreigner, He can make us feel at home even if all we have is Him. During the times we do rebel in ways that would merit His discipline, the Lord chooses to act in wisdom and timing that match up with the greater role we play in things.

We will all likely have opportunities in life to respond to God as each person in this situation did: a Naomi experience of tremendous loss, a Ruth experience of a tremendous choice, and a Boaz experience of a tremendous redemption. How we act in those times is the difference between being controlled by the circumstances versus giving God control over every detail. Our trials allow us the chance to express trust in Him, for they give Him opportunity to take something that doesn't belong and replace it with something that does.

The core way Christ does this is by transforming you from a sinner into a saint. 2 Corinthians 5:17 states that if anyone is in Christ he or she is a "new creation" for the old has gone and the new has come. While you could remain a foreigner separated from God, He takes you in, makes you His own and lets you live in the identity of His household as a family member.

OTHERS' STORY

Others around us will often form a view of God based on how we treat one another. When the famine hit and Naomi's family left the land, Boaz had stayed behind in the Promised Land and God made him a man of great prestige and resources. Instead of hoarding his wealth, Boaz took steps to make sure Ruth was able to glean food and drink each day to support her and Naomi. He was so intrigued by her commitment to Naomi that it warmed his own heart and he reached out to her to continue what would become a contagious blessing. Ruth was so moved by Boaz's grace that she became his wife.

Just as we can draw inspiration from this story, so will others draw inspiration from how they see us regard the people around us. While others may be more inclined to write one another off for petty offenses, God and His values stand out when someone does what is beyond what's expected. Reconciliation and grace push back against what's easy in order to foster what's genuinely righteous.

The struggle is others may need an initial catalyst to begin the process, such as the first person to step forward or a teaching that motivates them to all take action together. Many individuals have been worn down by life and operate with their guard up, cynical and without optimism that anything will ever change. When someone among them stands up and shows them it's possible to live differently, it's as if for the first time in a long time a new option for how to live emerges that can be more redemptive for all than protective for self.

THE WORLD'S STORY

There are times when our geography in the world is connected to our relationship with the Lord. For example, God promised Israel (Deuteronomy 11:13-17) that if they would be obedient to Him they would never have to wonder where their provision would come from. Given that there was a famine in the land during the era of Ruth, it's likely that Israel was living disobediently on some level. It may also be why when Naomi felt the hand of the Lord had gone out against her that she chose to go back to the land of Israel as an act of returning back to her God. Even with the remnant of a life that had left her growing bitter, she returned to the Lord by returning to her home territory. Although the people there were struggling, they had more than she had and were anchored to God.

Jews will often make some sort of pilgrimage in their faith even today, such as going to Jerusalem or a holy place for a rite of passage. Even though as a people group they have suffered greatly over the centuries, they (like Naomi) have attempted to journey closer to God through Israel and its traditions rather than turn their backs on Him. It's why today there remains a constant struggle in the Middle East over territory, with one side accusing the other that they are the "foreigners" who don't belong.

For all the challenges Christians face worldwide, the sovereignty of God still remains. True believers can connect with the Lord wherever they are, and are even called to reach those far from Him. The challenge is to do what Boaz did—receive a foreigner into your circle and into the family of God without you losing what is distinctively and purely God.