

The Story – Chapter 9 – Faith of a Foreign Woman

Introduction

This week we look at the biblical book of Ruth, a wonderful story of sacrificial love and redemption. And once, again, loyalty and love are epitomized by the actions of a foreign woman (which is why the chapter title is The Faith of a Foreign Woman; however, I call this story The Things We Do for Love). If you don't have The Story book, you can read the book of Ruth. (It's only 4 chapters long.)

Chapter 9: The Things We Do For Love

The story of Ruth is a literary and redemptive gem that glimmers against a backdrop of bleakness. Set in the time period of the Judges, we first read about Naomi's family leaving Bethlehem to escape a famine. They settle in Moab, where Naomi's husband dies and her two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Within ten years, both sons die as well, and all that is left are three widows, no children, and no prospects. Things are not looking good. Naomi hears that the famine is over and decides to return to Bethlehem. She urges her daughters-in-law to go back to their homes where they might find new husbands. Orpah leaves but Ruth refuses to leave her. Her poetic declaration of loyalty and commitment offers the first sign of hope: “Where you go, I will go; your people will be my people and your God my God” (p. 122).

The duo of widows make the journey back to the Land of Promise where their only hope is mere survival. Once there, Ruth exercises a widow's right to gather extra grain from the fields. Her field of choice just happens to be the farmstead of a man named Boaz, who also happens to be a relative of Naomi's deceased husband. (As such, Boaz is a family guardian who could act to carry on the heritage of Naomi's deceased husband and sons.) He notices Ruth from the start and admires the way she works to provide for her aging mother-in-law. Boaz offers his help and protection. (Ruth notices him too.)

Jewish law requires a family guardian to redeem both a widow and her land to preserve the family line. So, as is the custom, Naomi tells Ruth to offer herself in marriage to Boaz. He is delighted but also knew of a closer relative who has the right of first refusal. That other man chooses against redeeming the land, since it would also mean he would have to marry Ruth, which might threaten the inheritance he would pass along to his own children. Neither Boaz nor Ruth are disappointed by his choice since his refusal paves the way for Boaz to fulfill his role as a family guardian or “kinsman redeemer.” Boaz gladly marries Ruth and redeems the family's land. Boaz and Ruth become the father of Obed who is the grandfather of King David, an ancestor of Jesus.

Boaz's love for Ruth is a mirror image of the heart of God. Boaz steps in as a willing kinsmen redeemer and foreshadows Jesus who will step in as the Redeemer for all people.

Discussion Questions

As you read, remember there are discussion questions for each chapter beginning on page 473 of the book and also questions that can be found on The Story bookmark (which is also on our website). Also, feel free to consider some of the questions below:

Meanings of Biblical names are always significant. Elimelek's name meant "my God is King." Naomi's name meant "pleasant," but she later asked to be called Mara, meaning "bitterness." Ruth's name meant "friendship." Boaz's name meant "swift strength." Who best lives up to their names and who does not?

The story of Ruth describes some of the laws that God gave Israel to take care of marginalized people (see, for example, Leviticus 19:9-10). What do these laws and customs reveal about the heart of God for the poor, the widow and the orphan? What practical things can we do to care for people who are struggling today, so that we can reflect the heart of God?

Ruth, Naomi and Boaz end up forming a somewhat unorthodox family. Neither Ruth nor Naomi had any reason to welcome each other as family. Social acceptability said that Naomi had no business having a Moabite daughter in law, and Ruth had no business staying with Naomi. And arguably Boaz had no legal obligation to redeem Naomi's land or marry Ruth since he is not the closest relative. But yet, by the end of the story, they all find themselves family. When have you found yourself allied with people who may not be your blood relatives, but act as family to you? How has God worked in those relationships?

When you think of how Naomi's life went from Mara (bitter) to Naomi (pleasant), what are some of the ways that God extended grace to this faithful woman? Can you think of someone who needs you to come and remind them that they are loved (or pleasant)? What is something you can take to extend grace to such person?

As you read chapter 9, what are some of the losses that Naomi and Ruth faced? How did each of them respond to these painful experiences? Do you think their perspective on things changed over time? Has your perspective on some of your difficult life experiences changed over time? Have some of these experiences led you closer to God?

The word for redeem is used many times in this story, making it a key theme. What does it mean to be redeemed? How does Boaz's redeeming of Ruth compare to our redemption found in Christ?

What questions came up for you while you were reading this chapter?