



# RUTH



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By  
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Ruth ii. 4.

And, behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said unto the reapers, The Lord be with you. And they answered him, The Lord bless thee.

Most of you know the story of Ruth, from which my text is taken, and you have thought it, no doubt, a pretty story. But did you ever think why it was in the Bible?

Every book in the Bible is meant to teach us, as the Article of our Church says, something necessary to salvation. But what is there necessary to our salvation in the Book of Ruth?

No doubt we learn from it that Ruth was the ancestress of King David; and that she was, therefore, an ancestress of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ: but curious and interesting as that is, we can hardly call that something necessary to salvation. There must be something more in the book. Let us take it simply as it stands, and see if we can find it out.

It begins by telling us how a man of Bethlehem has been driven out of his own country by a famine, he and his wife Naomi and his two sons, and has gone over the border into Moab, among the heathen; how his two sons have married heathen women, and the name of the one was Ruth, and the name of the other Orpah. Then how he dies, and his two sons; and how Naomi, his widow, hears that the Lord had visited His people, in giving them bread; how the people of Judah were prosperous again, and she is there all alone among the heathen; so she sets out to go back to her own people, and her daughters-in-law go with her.

But she persuades them not to go. Why do they not stay in their own land? And they weep over each other; and Orpah kisses her mother-in-law, and goes back; but Ruth cleaves unto her.

Then follows that famous speech of Ruth's, which, for its simple beauty and poetry, has become a proverb, and even a song, among us to this day.

And Ruth said, 'Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:

'Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.'

So when she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go to her, she left speaking to her.

And they come to Bethlehem, and all the town was moved about them; and they said, Is this Naomi?

'And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?'

And they came to Bethlehem about the passover tide, at the beginning of barley harvest, and Ruth went out into the fields to glean, and she lighted on a part of the field which belonged to Boaz, who was of her husband's kindred.

And Boaz was a mighty man of wealth, according to the simple fashions of that old land and old time. Not like one of our great modern noblemen, or merchants, but rather like one of our wealthy yeomen: a man who would not disdain to work in his field with his own slaves, after the wholesome fashion of those old times, when a royal prince and mighty warrior would sow the corn with his own hands, while his man opened the furrow with the plough before him. There Boaz dwelt, with other yeomen, up among the limestone hills, in the little walled village of Bethlehem, which was afterwards to become so famous and so holy; and had, we may suppose, his vineyard and his olive-garden on the rocky slopes, and his corn-fields in the vale below, and his flock of sheep and goats feeding on the downs; while all his wealth besides lay, probably, after the Eastern fashion, in one great chest—full of rich dresses, and gold and silver ornaments, and coins, all foreign, got in exchange for his corn, and wine, and oil, from Assyrian, or Egyptian, or Phœnician traders; for the Jews then had no money, and very little manufacture, of their own.

And he would have had hired servants, too, and slaves, in his house; treated kindly enough, as members of the family, eating and drinking at his table, and faring nearly as well as he fared himself.

A stately, God-fearing man he plainly was; respectable, courteous, and upright, and altogether worthy of his wealth; and he went out into the field, looking after his reapers in the barley harvest—about our Easter-tide.

And he said to his reapers, The Lord be with you. And they answered, The Lord bless thee.

Then he saw Ruth, who had happened to light upon his field, gleaning after the reapers, and found out who she was, and bid her glean without fear, and abide by his maidens, for he had charged the young men that they shall not touch her.

'And Boaz said unto her, At meal-time come thou hither, and eat of the bread, and dip thy morsel in the vinegar. And she sat beside the reapers: and he reached her parched corn, and she did eat, and was sufficed, and left.

'And when she was risen up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not: and let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not.

'So she gleaned in the field until even, and beat out that she had gleaned: and it was about an ephah of barley.'

Then follows the simple story, after the simple fashion of those days. How Naomi bids Ruth wash and anoint herself, and put on her best garments, and go down to Boaz' floor (his barn as we should call it now) where he is going to eat, and drink, and sleep, and there claim his protection as a near kinsman.

And how Ruth comes in softly and lies down at his feet, and how he treats her honourably and courteously, and promises to protect her. But there is a nearer kinsman than he, and he must be asked first if he will do the kinsman's part, and buy his cousin's plot of land, and marry his cousin's widow with it.

And how Boaz goes to the town-gate next day, and sits down in the gate (for the porch of the gate was a sort of town-hall or vestry-room in the East, wherein all sorts of business was done), and there he challenges the kinsman,—Will he buy the ground and marry Ruth? And he will not: he cannot afford it. Then Boaz calls all the town to witness that day, that he has bought all that was Elimelech's, and Ruth the Moabite to be his wife.

'And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said, We are witnesses. The Lord make the woman that is come into thine house like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel: and do thou worthily in Ephratah, and be famous in Bethlehem.'

And in due time Ruth had a son. ‘And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel.

‘And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter-in-law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him.

‘And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it.

‘And the women her neighbours gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi; and they called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.’

And so ends the Book of Ruth.

Now, my friends, can you not answer for yourselves the question which I asked at first,—Why is the story of Ruth in the Bible, and what may we learn from it which is necessary for our salvation?

I think, at least, that you will be able to answer it—if not in words, still in your hearts—if you will read the book for yourselves.

For does it not consecrate to God that simple country life which we lead here? Does it not tell us that it is blessed in the sight of Him who makes the grass to grow, and the corn to ripen in its season?

Does it not tell us, that not only on the city and the palace, on the cathedral and the college, on the assemblies of statesmen, on the studies of scholars, but upon the meadow and the corn-field, the farm-house and the cottage, is written, by the everlasting finger of God—Holiness unto the Lord? That it is all blessed in His sight; that the simple dwellers in villages, the simple tillers of the ground, can be as godly and as pious, as virtuous and as high-minded, as those who have nought to do but to serve God in the offices of religion? Is it not an honour and a comfort, to such as us, to find one whole book of the Holy Bible occupied by the simplest story of the fortunes of a yeoman’s family, in a lonely village among the hills of Judah? True, the yeoman’s widow became the ancestress of David, and of his mighty line of kings—nay, the ancestress of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. But the Book of Ruth was not written mainly to tell us that fact. It mentions it at the end, and as it were by accident. The book itself is taken up with the most simple and careful details of country life, country customs, country folk—as if that was what we were to think of, as we read of Ruth. And that is what we do think of—not of the ancestress of kings, but of the fair young heathen gleaning among the corn, with the pious, courteous, high-minded yeoman bidding her abide fast by his maidens, and when she was athirst drink of the wine which the young men have drawn, for it has been fully showed him all she has done for her mother-in-law; and the Lord will recompense her work, and a full reward be given her of the Lord God of Israel, under the shadow of whose wings she is to come to trust. That is the scene which painters naturally draw; that is what we naturally think of; because God, who gave us the Bible, meant us to think thereof; and to know, that working in the quiet village, or in the distant field, women may be as pure and modest, men as high-minded and well-bred, and both as full of the fear of God, and the thought that God’s eye is upon them, as if they were in a place, or a station, where they had nothing to do but to watch over the salvation of their own souls; that the meadow and the harvest-field need not be, as they too often are, places for temptation and for defilement; where the old too often teach the young, not to fear God and keep themselves pure, but to copy their coarse jests and foul language, and listen to stories which had better be buried for ever in the dirt out of which they spring. You know what I mean. You know what field-work too often is. Read the Book of Ruth, and see what field-work may be, and ought to be.

Yes, my dear friends. Pure you may be, and gentle, upright, and godly, about your daily work, if the Spirit of God be within you.

Country life has its temptations: and so has town life, and every life. But there has no temptation taken you save

such as is common to man. Boaz, the rich yeoman; Naomi, the broken-hearted and ruined; Ruth, the fair young widow—all had the very same temptations as are common to you now, here; but they conquered them, because they feared God and kept His commandments; and to know that, is necessary for your salvation.

And, looked at in this light, the Book of Ruth is indeed a prophecy; a forecast and a shadow of the teaching of the Lord Jesus Himself, who spake to country folk as never man spake before, and bade them look upon the simple, every-day matters which were around them in field and wood, and open their eyes to the Divine lessons of God's providence, which also were all around them; who, born Himself in that little village of Bethlehem, and brought up in the little village of Nazareth, among the lonely lanes and downs, spoke of country things to country folk, and bade them read in the great green book which God has laid open before them all day long. Who bade them to consider the lilies of the field, how they grew, and the ravens, how God fed them; to look on the fields, white for harvest, and pray God to send labourers into his spiritual harvest-field; to look on the tares which grew among the wheat, and know we must not try to part them ourselves, but leave that to God at the last day; to look on the fishers, who were casting their net into the Lake of Galilee, and sorting the fish upon the shore, and be sure that a day was coming, when God would separate the good from the bad, and judge every man according to his work and worth; and to learn from the common things of country life the rule of the living God, and the laws of the kingdom of heaven.

One word more, and I have done.

The story of Ruth is also the consecration of woman's love. I do not mean of the love of wife to husband, divine and blessed as that is. I mean that depth and strength of devotion, tenderness, and self-sacrifice, which God has put in the heart of all true women; and which they spend so strangely, and so nobly often, on persons who have no claim on them, from whom they can receive no earthly reward;—the affection which made women minister of their substance to our Lord Jesus Christ; which brought Mary Magdalene to the foot of the Cross, and to the door of the tomb, that she might at least see the last of Him whom she thought lost to her for ever; the affection which has made a wise man say, that as long as women and sorrow are left in the world, so long will the Gospel of our Lord Jesus live and conquer therein; the affection which makes women round us every day ministering angels, wherever help or comfort are needed; which makes many a woman do deeds of unselfish goodness known only to God; not known even to herself; for she does them by instinct, by the inspiration of God's Spirit, without self-consciousness or pride, without knowing what noble things she is doing, without spoiling the beauty of her good work by even admitting to herself, 'What a good work it is! How right she is in doing it! How much it will advance the salvation of her own soul!'—but thinking herself, perhaps, a very useless and paltry person; while the angels of God are claiming her as their sister and their peer.

Yes, if there is a woman in this congregation—and there is one, I will warrant, in every congregation in England—who is devoting herself for the good of others; giving up the joys of life to take care of orphans who have no legal claim on her; or to nurse a relation, who perhaps repays her with little but exacting peevishness; or who has spent all her savings, in bringing up her brothers, or in supporting her parents in their old age,—then let her read the story of Ruth, and be sure that, like Ruth, she will be repaid by the Lord. Her reward may not be the same as Ruth's: but it will be that which is best for her, and she shall in no wise lose her reward. If she has given up all for Christ, it shall be repaid her ten-fold in this life, and in the world to come life everlasting. If, with Ruth, she is true to the inspirations of God's Spirit, then, with Ruth, God will be true to her. Let her endure, for in due time she shall reap, if she faint not;—and to know that, is necessary for her salvation.

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