

THE BOOK OF RUTH – NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY

PART ONE – EARLY PROMISE, TERRIBLE TRAGEDY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE WAY BACK

Somewhere towards the end of the period of the Judges, between 1100-1200BC, is this beautiful love story. The whole Bible makes it plain that marriage was a great idea God had in which a man and a woman, chosen for each other by Him, would enjoy a lifelong, God-given love for each other.(Gen.2:24) The Old Testament contains very few examples of a lasting, love-marriages. Isaac and Rebecca began well but favoritism towards their two sons spoiled their marriage later.(Gen.24:67; 25:28) David and Bathsheba began badly though God forgave them and blessed them later.(II Sam.11; 12:24) Hosea and Gomer began,(Hos.1:3) and ended well,(Hos.3:1) but in between their marriage was a dismal failure. Solomon wrote the moving love poem, the Song of Solomon, and knew all about love in theory, as he explained in Proverbs, but with 700 wives and 300 girlfriends, his home life was a disaster.(I Kgs.11:1) The story of Ruth and Boaz gives us hope that God's magnificent theory can work in practice. And remember that earthly marriage is simply meant to be an illustration of the marriage in heaven between Christ and His church.(Eph.5:25-29; Rev.21:2)

The beginning of the story of Ruth is not promising. A man from Bethlehem takes his wife and two sons and moves in a time of famine to the land of Moab.(1:1) Right from the start of the Hebrew people living in Caanan, God had promised to keep His people through good times and bad times if only they would trust Him fully.(Gen.12:1-9) Whenever they doubted God and went looking for food elsewhere the results were damaging for them and generations to come, as when Abram went to Egypt in a time of famine and returned with Hagar.(Gen.12:10) When they trusted God, He provided as He did with manna in the wilderness for the whole nation,(Exod.16) or bread and meat for one man as in the case of Elijah.(I Kgs.17:3-6)

Names in Hebrew had everyday meanings and often give clues to the message of the story. Elimelech means 'God is king' and Naomi means 'pleasant', so the future looked promising for them as a couple. But their two sons' names were foreboding. Chilion means 'failure' and Mahlon means 'sick'. Now the prospect was not looking so good! The two boys, contrary to God's plain direction to Israel,(Num.25:1,2) married Moabite women who did not share their faith. One by one all three men, the father and both sons, died leaving three widows. Widowhood in those days was so often a desperate situation unless family stepped in to help.(1:2-5)

Naomi realizes she should never have left Israel and cannot wait to get back to the place where God has again provided for His people, as He promised to do.(1:6) Ample food as well as a caring family are two good reasons to go back. But what about her two daughters-in-law, both Moabites, who presumably belong among their own people and with their Moabite gods? The two girls begin to follow their mother-in-law's example but she tries to discourage them from doing it just out of loyalty to her.(1:7-9) The

culture of those days required a man whose brother died to marry his widow.(Deut.25:5; Lk.20:27-33) She asks the girls whether they really want to come with her when she is too old to have more sons, even if she married again. Surely their best chance of finding new husbands would be back with their own relatives.(1:10-13) Again their names give clues to the choices they would make. One daughter, Orpah, which means ‘obstinate’ or ‘stubborn’, takes the opportunity to go back to being a Moabite.(1:14) It is our stubbornness which holds us back from trusting the Lord rather than returning to our old ways. The other one, Ruth, which means ‘friendship’, is determined to stick with her mother-in-law, and her new God. She is prepared to die rather than leave Naomi.(1:15-18) Only the Lord offers us true friendship.(Jn.15:13-15)

Together they set out to return to Elimelech’s home town, Bethlehem, the future birthplace of King David,(I Sam.16:1) and of Jesus.(Matt.2:1) Their reappearance in Bethlehem creates a great stir and a warm welcome. Could this really be Naomi? Naomi herself is still grieving deeply and suggests she should change her name from ‘pleasant’ to Mara, ‘bitterness’. She acknowledges she should never have left Bethlehem, and sees the unhappy events of her life as God’s punishment for the disobedience of her and her husband.(1:19-21)

Their return to Bethlehem coincides with the beginning of the barley harvest, and a fruitful future.(1:22) The Lord has exciting things in store which far exceed their expectations!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does this first part of the story of Naomi illustrate the mistakes we all make and the consequences in the loss of personal happiness and family life?
2. To where does Naomi have to go back to find the answer to her shattered life? Where do we have to begin if we are to find answers to our own struggles?
3. Where else is Bethlehem in Judah mentioned in the Bible?(Gen.35:19; I Sam:16:4; Mic.5:2; Matt.2:1-16) What is the common theme each time Bethlehem comes into the story?
4. What had Ruth recognized in Naomi which made her determined to stay with her wherever she went? How should we respond when people who are searching spiritually attach themselves to us?
5. How does Naomi understand the part God has had in what has gone wrong in her life? Was her interpretation of events correct?
6. Whom might Naomi represent in the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ?