

CHAPTER 9

The Faith of a Foreign Woman

TIMELESS TRUTH: God's Gracious Redemption Extends To All.

CHAPTER SUMMARY: (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

The story of Israel's judges closes with a line that could just as well be the opening for the story of Ruth: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25). God's chosen ones looked more like a reality show gone wrong than a holy beacon of hope. They had abandoned God's plan (again) and had become moral misfits and spiritual adulterers. The light had gone out on God's people. Then a foreigner stepped onto the stage and a candle of hope flickered once again.

The story of Ruth is a literary and redemptive gem that glimmers against a backdrop of blackness. In the opening scene, Naomi's family caravanned away from the Promised Land where famine had left them hungry for food and for hope. They settled in Moab where idol worship was the prevailing ritual and God seemed far away. Naomi's two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. The weddings were too quickly followed by funerals - three of them. Naomi's husband died first. Soon after, both of her sons died too. And all that was left was three widows, no children, and no prospects. The prospects were indeed grim.

Naomi heard the famine had lifted and decided to return to Bethlehem. She sent her daughters-in-law back to their homes where they might find new husbands. Ruth expressed her strong will and even stronger faith by refusing to leave. 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 made the journey back to the Land of Promise where the only hope was mere survival.

Once there, Ruth exercised a widow's right to gather the extra grain from the fields. Her field of choice just happened to be the farmstead of a godly man named Boaz. He also happened to be a family guardian who could carry on the heritage of Naomi's deceased husband and sons. He noticed Ruth from the start and admired the way she worked to provide for her aging mother-in-law. Boaz offered his help and protection; Ruth noticed him too.

Jewish law required a family guardian to redeem both a widow and her land to preserve the family line. So, as was the custom, Naomi told Ruth to offer herself in marriage to Boaz. He was delighted but also knew of a closer relative who had the right of first refusal. That man chose to forfeit Naomi's land since it also meant he would have to marry Ruth, which might threaten the inheritance he would pass along to his own children. Neither Boaz nor Ruth was disappointed by his choice since his refusal paved the way for Boaz to fulfill his role as a family guardian or "kinsman redeemer." Boaz gladly married Ruth and redeemed the family's land. God cheerfully restored Naomi and planted a family tree: Ruth and Boaz ----> Obed ----> Jesse ----> King David ----> Jesus.

There's no denying this story as a great romance. But even more, it brings us to a defining episode in the greatest love story ever told. Boaz's love for Ruth is a mirror image of the heart of God. Boaz steps in as a willing kinsman redeemer and foreshadows One who would step in as the Redeemer for all people. So, it turns out that even the "not so chosen" are chosen after all. God's plan will overwhelm every obstacle, overturn every injustice and overcome completely in the end. Soon, we'll see that God is writing a happily ever after for this story after all.

DISCUSSION STARTER:

Describe a time when you felt uncomfortable, out of place, and far from home.

GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. Meanings of Biblical names are always significant. Elimelek's name meant "my God is King." Naomi's name meant "my pleasantness," but later asked to be called Mara, meaning "bitterness." Ruth's name meant "friendship." Boaz's name meant "swift strength." Who best lived up to their names and who did not?
2. Compare Naomi's attitude at the beginning and end of this story. How does her view of God and the "Upper Story" change?
3. Look at Ruth and Boaz's interaction with Naomi. What can you learn about the challenges and benefits of caring for an aging parent? What challenges do you face with your parents?
4. The period of the Judges was marked by weak faith and irresponsible living, but this foreign woman gives hope. What specific examples of strong faith and responsible living can you find in the characters of Ruth and Boaz?
5. The story of Ruth demonstrates laws that God had given Israel to take care of marginalized people (Deuteronomy 25:5-10, Leviticus 25:25, Leviticus 19:9-10). What do these laws and customs reveal about the heart of God for the poor, the widow and the orphan? How could your group care for the less fortunate and thereby reflect the heart of God?
6. The love story of Ruth and Boaz stands in contrast to many of the "love" stories we hear today. What can single men and women learn from their example (note Ruth's reputation in the community, p. 123, 125)?
7. The word for redeem is used twenty 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?
8. What some people might call coincidence others call divine providence. What are some key examples of God's divine providence in this story?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.