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Ruth 1:1-18

Children’s Bible Stories All Grown Up: Ruth and Naomi

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Ruth 1:1-18 Common English Bible

During the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. A man with his wife and two sons went from Bethlehem of Judah to dwell in the territory of Moab. The name of that man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the territory of Moab and settled there. But Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died. Then only she was left, along with her two sons. They took wives for themselves, Moabite women; the name of the first was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth. And they lived there for about ten years. But both of the sons, Mahlon and Chilion, also died. Only the woman was left, without her two children and without her husband. Then she arose along with her daughters-in-law to return from the field of Moab, because while in the territory of Moab she had heard that the Lord had paid attention to his people by providing food for them. She left the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law went with her. They went along the road to return to the land of Judah. Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, “Go, turn back, each of you to the household of your mother. May the Lord deal faithfully with you, just as you have done with the dead and with me. May the Lord provide for you so that you may find security, each woman in the household of her husband.” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. But they replied to her, “No, instead we will return with you, to your people.” Naomi replied, “Turn back, my daughters. Why would you go with me? Will there again be sons in my womb, that they would be husbands for you? Turn back, my daughters. Go. I am too old for a husband. If I were to say that I have hope, even if I had a husband tonight, and even more, if I were to bear sons— would you wait until they grew up? Would you refrain from having a husband? No, my daughters. This is more bitter for me than for you, since the Lord’s will has come out against me.” Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth stayed with her. Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you.” When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her about it.

For the next few weeks we are looking at Bible stories that we might be familiar with, maybe they were stories that we heard as children, or maybe we are hearing them for the first time, and trying to look at them critically. Children’s Bible stories all grown up. It means that we see that the people in the Bible are human. They are self-serving and self-sacrificing. Out of the tangle of human interactions, God’s redemption occurs again and again and again.[[1]](#footnote-2) In our Bible story today our heroine is a Moabite woman who marries an Israelite and returns to Israel with her mother-in-law. Now, Moabites normally do not get good press in the Hebrew Bible. Deuteronomy 23:3 says that no Moabite should be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation.

But the story of Ruth doesn’t pay a lot of attention to Ruth’s ethnicity because it is more a story about family relationships. This is a story about how people behave toward one another. The story begins like many stories begin in the Bible, with a famine in the land of Israel. So, a man from Bethlehem named Elimelech, goes to live in Moab where his sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Then, Elimelech dies and his sons die as well. It seems like the sons died at the same time, but we don’t know for sure. There was a tradition at the time called levirate marriage that if a man dies without having a son, the brother has to marry the widow and raise up an heir to the deceased. If this happened, then the widow would stay connected with the family and be taken care of, but more importantly the family property would stay in the family.

Since there is no mention of levirate law in Ruth’s story, it seems like the sons die at the same time. Naomi tells her daughters-in-law that she has no sons in her womb that they could marry in levirate marriage, so Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return to the houses of their parents so they could find new husbands. Orpah returns home, but Ruth refuses. We have this wonderful line that is on wedding bands at James Avery Jewelry. “Where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” Ruth stays with her mother-in-law instead of seeking the safety of returning to her own people. Ruth was showing love and loyalty over and beyond what was considered normal or expected. Ruth acts out of loyalty and love, not by logic. Through love and loyalty, Ruth creates her family.

Three times Naomi tells Ruth to go back, and so I began to wonder if Naomi would have preferred to go home without the burden of a Moabite daughter-in-law. The Moabites were despised for generations, so Naomi’s silence at Ruth’s unshakeable commitment to accompany her might be resentment, irritation, or frustration.[[2]](#footnote-3) When foreigners are treated with suspicion, it is easier for us to not associate with them. We see that today. Ruth professes her allegiance to her mother-in-law and to her way of life, but people were still suspicious. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her she stopped speaking to her (Ruth 1:18). Is the silence a sign of anger? Or in our desire to have this story be happy, do we interpret the silence as a sign of gratitude?

Ruth and Naomi return to Bethlehem, literally the house of bread, without any money and without any prospects. Naomi says that she went away full but she is returning empty, but right away we are told about a barley harvest. She thinks that all hope is lost, but things keep happening to show her signs of hope, if she can see them. We may think that there is no hope, we may think that God isn’t with us, but God is always with us, there is always hope. Have you ever been in a place where you can’t see the light? You can’t see the good? Naomi arrives in Bethlehem and can’t stop sharing about the emptiness in her life. We don’t know if she is so consumed with grief or if that is just how Naomi is, but all she can talk about is the hopelessness. Naomi can’t fill the emptiness that is in her life through her own efforts. She feels utterly and completely alone and she doesn’t see the community that is around her. In the midst of her bitterness and grief, God continues to be with Naomi. We might not want to be around Naomi and her complaining, but God does not abandon her.

We are introduced to Boaz, a distant relative to Elimelech. Boaz wasn’t close enough of a relative to be under any legal obligation with the levirate law. Ruth is planning on supporting herself and Naomi by gathering the ears of grain left for the poor. Ruth and Naomi have to rely on the charitable whims of others for food and shelter. It is harvest season and Ruth is on the field when she first meets Boaz, but Ruth doesn’t know who he is. Naomi knows he owns the field and that he is a relative and she plans for Boaz to marry Ruth because then they will be secure and safe. Boaz doesn’t know about Naomi’s plans and when Ruth hears them she does what her mother-in-law tells her to do. She washes and anoints herself and puts on her best clothes. Boaz has eaten and drunk and is content on the threshing floor. The threshing floor is a smooth, flat surface that was used when they harvested the grain. It is where the grain would be separated from the chaff. The harvested produce would be spread over the threshing floor and then cattle or oxen would be led over it to crush and break the sheaves apart with their hooves. Or people would use sticks to beat the sheaves apart.

To prepare you for the next part of our story, you need to know that if you were listening to this story in Biblical times, you would know about Ruth’s ancestor, the mother of the Moabites. Remember Lot and his wife who turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed? Lot settles in a cave with his two daughters and the daughters talk about how their father is old and how their only male prospect to have offspring is sitting right in front of them. So, they give their father wine and as a result of the night’s activities, the daughters each have a son, one named Moab because he is the ancestor of the Moabites. This is the background for what happens next.

Ruth comes stealthily and “uncovers Boaz’s feet” and lays down. Uncovering Boaz’s feet is a euphemism for intimacy. Boaz is happy to have his feet uncovered by Ruth. Ruth asks Boaz to spread his cloak over her which signifies protection and Boaz very romantically says that there is another man who is more closely related to Naomi, but if this other man doesn’t want to marry Ruth, then Boaz is willing. Boaz talks with the relative and he is interested in buying Naomi’s field but not if he has to take Ruth in the bargain. Boaz marries Ruth, and Ruth has a child and the emptiness that Naomi complained of in the beginning of the story is filled. Isn’t it wonderful how a baby can completely change people’s outlook on life?

At the end of the story we get the genealogy of Ruth’s child all the way to King David. The story in Ruth puts a positive spin on the fact that King David’s great grandmother was Moabite. King David wouldn’t even exist without a foreigner. The story also shows us that when we act with faithfulness and compassion, we can see all of the ways that God is working. God is always with us. We might get hung up on our pedigree, if we are good enough, if we come from the right neighborhood, but where we come from isn’t as important as how our heart is. Ruth’s heart was good. Ruth stuck with her mother-in-law because they were family for each other. Naomi is able to let go of her bitterness because her emptiness has been filled with new life. How do we let go of our emptiness when we don’t have a happy ending? In the Bible story, Ruth loving faithfulness reflects the loving faithfulness of God. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are never alone.

I saw something this week that made me think about how we create family and how we create community. There is a movement called The People’s Supper that aims to create community in our nation today by helping us to see beneath the categories and the headlines and see each other as real people with real struggles and real fears and real hopes and real dreams. The goal is to have supper with folks because supper is a place where we can come together and share meaningful stories, good food, and create community. We can build understanding and trust over supper. They have a pledge of allegiance to each other, so in honor of July 4th, I want to share this pledge written by Micky Jones with you. “We the people are committed to our neighbors next door and miles away. We pledge to one another to live into a visionary American story of unity in diversity, and hope over fear. To myself:  I pledge to love myself so that I might better love my neighbor. To my neighbors:  I pledge to meet you at the table of community in which we can all thrive. To those around the table:  I pledge to listen deeply to understand where your story intersects with and diverges from mine. To each other:  We commit the time and energy needed to create a greater future. I will walk beside you, knowing that we may not get there quickly but we will get there together.”

Do we pledge to stand with each other? Do we plan to stick with each other like Ruth stuck with Naomi? Do we pledge to listen deeply and walk alongside one another, even in moments where we disagree? I think it is our tendency to see ourselves as Ruth, we want her to be the model for our morality, but we are Naomi because we are the recipients of undeserved, unearned love, and our redemption, our salvation, is due to someone else’s loving kindness, not our own. God uses other people to show us love. God uses a Moabite, a foreigner, someone who is despised simply because of their ethnicity, someone who is denied admittance to the assembly of the Lord, to save Naomi, the Hebrew people, and ultimately us. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Ruth. Page. 946. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Ruth. Page. 908. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)