

Faithful God

The Wisdom of God's Sovereignty
in the book of Ruth

Sinclair B. Ferguson

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Chapter One

Ruth: her story and ours

'He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.' (Psalm 91:1-4)

The book of Ruth is not a work of deep theological reasoning like Paul's epistle to the Romans, yet it is full of theology. It is not a magnificent symphony on the work of Christ like the Gospel of John, yet it ultimately points to the coming of Christ. It is not full of vivid apocalyptic imagery like the book of the Revelation, yet it traces the details of God's working in the unfolding of the events of history. It is not basic instruction about the kingdom of God like the Sermon on the Mount, yet it contains important lessons about life in that kingdom.

The book of Ruth does all this by teaching the timeless lessons illustrated in the lives of its three main characters, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. Its historical narrative carries a message of lasting contemporary relevance. As with every other part of the Bible, there are important reasons to study this book.

God-breathed Scripture

When we study Scripture we ought to have in mind Paul's words:

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All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

In our English Bibles there is a chapter division at the end of these words. But it is somewhat misleading, for Paul goes on to urge Timothy to preach the word in such a way that it will accomplish the very goals for which he has just said it was originally given. He is to 'preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching' (2 Timothy 4:2).

Thus, whenever we turn to Scripture, whether to a passage, section or book, we should ask ourselves:

1. What does it teach us?
2. In what areas of our lives does it rebuke us?
3. What healing, restoring, transforming effect does this teaching have?
4. How does this section of Scripture equip me to serve Christ better?

When we read, or listen to, the exposition of Scripture (Paul is here urging Timothy to preach it, and how to do so), the result, whether directly or indirectly, should be increased understanding in each of these four areas.

So, in studying the book of Ruth, we want to look out for:

1. *Doctrine.* Teaching about God and his ways with us that will illumine our minds and our understanding of the gospel.
2. *Reproof.* Areas in which the Spirit will touch our consciences and convict us of sin and failure.
3. *Correction.* This word sometimes carries a negative

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connotation for us, but the term Paul uses (*epanorthōsis*) expresses the ideas of restoration and healing. It appears outside of the New Testament in a medical context for mending and restoring a broken limb. In the Septuagint¹ (which Paul knew) it was used, for example, of the ‘rebuilding’ of the broken wall of Jerusalem.

4. *Equipping.* As a result of studying, understanding and making the Scriptures our own, we should be the better prepared to serve our Lord Jesus Christ.

Redemptive history

The book of Ruth is part of the biblical narrative of redemptive history. It describes one more stage in the purposes of God as they moved inexorably towards the final redemption of his people through Jesus Christ.

No detail of the lives of our loved ones is insignificant to those of us who love them. That is also true of Jesus. When we come by faith to love him, the details of his life, the story of his background, his family history, all come to have a new fascination for us.

This is where the book of Ruth comes in. It focuses like a microscope on part of the detailed preparation God made in order to fulfil his purposes in redemptive history. Apparently the story of a small and insignificant family, it is actually one of the building blocks in God’s preparatory work as he sovereignly directed history towards the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ. In fact, the message of the book of Ruth cannot be fully understood apart from the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. In that sense, studying it will help us to understand Christ himself—and, indeed, the whole Bible—more fully and clearly.

Divine providence

The book of Ruth shows us in miniature form, but in considerable detail, how wise God's sovereign purposes really are.

We are not able to detect with perfect clarity the hand of God in the circumstances of our lives, far less see where he is heading with them. But when we find his autograph in the narratives of biblical history, we begin to recognise the same or similar patterns and principles emerging in our own lives too—and so we learn to see his handwriting in our own experiences.

The English poet William Cowper, who struggled a great deal to come to terms with his melancholic disposition and frequent deep depression, teaches us about this principle in his famous words:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform.
He plants his footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.²*

The problem with looking for footsteps planted in the sea (Cowper was probably thinking about Psalm 77:19) is that they immediately become invisible. God moves in mysterious ways; we do not have immediate access to his blueprints; we cannot second guess his purposes. We must learn to trust and obey him on the basis of his word of promise to us. One of the reasons we can do so is because of the evidence given to us in the Scriptures of his wise providence.

Finite creatures can never fully comprehend what an infinite God is doing. Those who are always sure of the details of God's plans for them need to be treated with some suspicion—they may be in for a shock! But here in the book of Ruth, God allows

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us to see the kind of thing he does, so that we may trust him when we see similar patterns being woven into our own lives.

At the time, of course, what God was accomplishing in the lives of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz was far from clear to any of them—even though these were the three people most involved in the story! More than that, right at the end of the story, the author shows how God was doing far more than they could have realised during their lifetimes.

In fact, as Christians in the New Testament era, we know even more than the author of the book of Ruth about what God was planning and working out through the lives of its central characters. In this way, God is saying to us, ‘Do you see how I planted my footsteps in the sea in the lives of these my children in past days? Let me show you how I did that. This is the kind of God I am; that is the kind of thing I do; and that is precisely what you may expect me to do in your lives, too. Trust me! I know exactly what I am doing.’ As we learn from God’s Word in this way, it becomes profitable to us.

What we see in the narrative sections of the Bible, then, is the way in which God takes up ordinary people into his purposes and uses them in ways inexplicable in terms of the ordinary. In these passages and books God shows us how he sovereignly works out his perfect will.

Reflections

So, as we read the book of Ruth, we discover it is a kind of mirror in which we see four different reflections.

- The first is that of the various characters who appear on the stage of the narrative: Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, along with some others who play secondary roles in the drama.

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- The second is the reflection of God himself. All historical narratives in the Old Testament are written from a specific point of view, sometimes referred to as the perspective of ‘the omniscient narrator’. The voice that tells the story always knows more than the characters involved in it. The narrator has access to God’s thoughts and plans. He speaks from hindsight. His voice gives us hints and clues about what God is doing in the situation. If we listen carefully to it, we will begin to detect the hand of God.
- The third reflection is, of course, that of Jesus. In one way or another all Scripture points to him and leads to him (Luke 24:27; 2 Timothy 3:15). It does so in many different ways. So when we read the Bible, we should ask the question: ‘How does this book or passage point ultimately to Christ?’ As we read Ruth, we will see Christ’s reflection appearing at different points in different ways.
- The fourth reflection is that of our own lives. We will notice this at different levels. Sometimes we will learn what to do and what to avoid. But, more fundamentally, we will see that when God works in our lives today, he continues to use the patterns of grace that are worked out in Scripture. In this way we begin to learn how God shapes our lives in order to make them like Christ (cf. Romans 6:17; 8:29). As we watch what God does in the lives of others, the manner of his working in our own lives becomes clearer.

The book of Ruth records experiences of joy and sorrow. It tells a story of home life, romance and marriage, of unexpected conversion and radical consecration. The book of Ruth is *multum in parvo* (much in little)—a little book containing far more about God than its size would suggest. Here we will find many lessons about his grace and his providence.

Ruth 1: 1-22

IN the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!' Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰And they said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.'¹¹But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you ¹⁴therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that

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the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.’¹⁴Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵And she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’¹⁶But Ruth said, ‘Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.’¹⁸And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

¹⁹So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’²⁰She said to them, ‘Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?’

²²So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.