

Ruth and Naomi: A Happy Ending by Rev Jane Kraft

Ruth Ch 4

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Over the last three weeks, as the story of Ruth unfolded you will have discovered that it has all the elements of a good TV drama. Like all good serial dramas, we begin episode four with the salient points in episode 1-3 just in case you can't remember what happened or missed some of it. There are one or two clues which will resonate with those who have a working knowledge of the Scriptures, and it will bring home the importance of Ruth for the fulfilment of God's plan for humankind. The story began with a natural disaster which prompted Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their sons to move from their hometown of Bethlehem in Judah to the country of Moab. While they were there tragedy struck and Elimelech died. The narrative then gave us a bit of light relief when Elimelech's two sons married two local girls but that was short lived as both the sons also died. These events left all three women widows without any means of support. Then some good news arrived, the famine was over and Naomi decided to return to her homeland. One daughter-in-law went with her, the other, after starting out on the journey yielded to Naomi's persuasion and returned to her

Moabite home. As the daughters-in-law go their separate ways the story turned its focus towards the love and loyalty of Ruth and the kindness she showed to Naomi as they travel to Judah. We learn that on arrival the Jewish customs stood them in good stead.

Perhaps we need to press the pause button for a moment and do a little bit of history, to understand what is happening both in the homecoming and the subsequent events in the story.

The ethics of the Children of Israel in the Old Testament were based on a precept which can be summed up in two words

Remember Egypt: the land where the Children of Israel settled following the journey there to get food at a time of famine in their own land.

The Hebrew people were to regulate the whole of their lives with the fact always before them, that they had been slaves in a foreign land:

slaves, whom God had redeemed.

They were charged to behave differently from their neighbours and, as they remembered their history to treat the poor, the foreigner and the stranger with justice and

compassion. To this end they were given very specific practical instructions.

Things like - Don't harvest every last grain from the fields or go round gathering up the dropped grapes, leave some pickings for those less fortunate than you are. Ruth and Naomi were to benefit from these laws.

Once back in Naomi's hometown, Ruth sets out to glean from the field of a kinsman of Elimelech, and this sets the scene for the entrance of another character who is to play a central part. Boaz.

Boaz is kind to Ruth, going beyond the requirements of the law in his instructions to the reapers for her benefit.

But things weren't moving quite quickly enough for Naomi who made plans to move things forward.

John explained how they did this last week and introduced us to the concept of the role of "kinsman redeemer" and his responsibilities towards near relatives and widows set out in Jewish law. The snag was that although Boaz was a near kinsman there was another nearer who had a greater claim. And with that exciting cliff-hanger we left the story last week. Will Boaz finally marry Ruth, or will it be the unknown kinsman who gets the girl?

In this final episode we encounter Boaz sitting at the town gate, waiting.

Gates in and out of towns and cities were a bit like marketplaces there was a lot of coming and going. So, it was an advantageous spot for trading, and important business and legal matters were discussed and transacted here.

Boaz patiently waits at this busy thoroughfare and eventually spots the man he needs to speak to. At Boaz's invitation they sit down together, and Boaz gathers ten senior men around them as witnesses. The action marks Boaz as a man of integrity, his dealings are open and there is no coercion or duplicity. However, things don't go quite according expectation, because, offered Elimelech's land which Naomi is selling, the unnamed Next of Kin agrees to buy. Which leads to Boaz pointing out that if he buys the land, he also takes on Ruth the Moabite. With due consideration the man decides that he will not buy the land after all, and in front of the witnesses, Boaz completes the transaction in the approved manner of the times and acquires not only the land but Ruth as his wife.

The Story of Ruth reminds us that the God of Israel is God of the whole world. This account of two women, poor and

marginalised in a man's world, who rise triumphant over adversity, is a reminder to us that God loves and uses the outsider as well as the devout insider.

We see that through the tragic and hopeless situation came hope.

Love, loyalty and commitment, faithfulness and kindness permeate the events making a huge difference not just to Ruth and Naomi's lives but to future events.

But the credits don't come up at this point for there is a bit more to come.

The story of Ruth ends with a very important piece of information. Following their marriage, Boaz and Ruth have a son called Obed. Now that is significant, because Obed became the Father of Jesse, who was the father of David, who became Israel's greatest King and the ancestor of Jesus who was born in Bethlehem in Judah. And that is why, if you read the genealogy of Jesus, in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel, you will find the name of a non-Israelite woman, Ruth.

Through an elderly woman and her non -Israelite daughter-in-law continuity of the line is achieved.

There is a German phrase which translated means "you never know what a thing is good for"

Some very small seemingly insignificant word, action or event can have far reaching effects of which we may never be aware of.

Through her loving loyalty and kindness Ruth became one small component in God's plan for the salvation of humankind.