



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

COMPASSION THROUGHOUT RUTH • Eric Silverman

The book of Ruth is a story of God's grace in the midst of dire circumstances. It is far more than a story of a single romantic relationship. However, many of us have difficulty understanding the full implications and context of the story. Let us examine some important, but perhaps, not so obvious elements of the book of Ruth.

An Unlikely Time For Compassion

The book opens by telling us that it takes place during the days of the judges in Israel. This means that the story of Ruth takes place during the significant gap of time after Moses' and Joshua's godly influence of the past, and before the institution of the divine monarchy where Saul, David, & Solomon would lead Israel before God. Without the presence of strong centralized godly leadership, Israel's faithfulness to God quickly slipped. The judges were regional leaders that God would raise up to deliver Israel from her oppressive neighbors, but a close reading of the book reveals that these were "heroes in gray hats." Even the judges were guilty of a variety of sins including intermarrying with pagan worshippers, idolatry, prostitution and human sacrifice. Even a quick reading of the book of Judges reveals that Israel quickly forgot her God and worshipped pagan gods instead of, or alongside of, the one true God. Accordingly, the morality of the day was often a lawless, "might makes right" sort of relativism. Judges closes with the explanation, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). If you find all of this disturbing, then good! What we are told about the time of the judges is supposed to be disturbing. We are supposed to be repulsed by the kind of anarchy that results when we abandon God. Even the famine mentioned in Ruth 1:1, should be understood as a sign of God's judgement on the times.

Unlikely Candidates for God's Compassion

While the book is named for Ruth, Naomi is an equally important character to the plot. Naomi should not be viewed as the most likely or deserving person for God's compassion. Living in the godless age of the judges, Naomi and her family were certainly influenced by some of the immoral trends of the day. Leaving Israel to live for years in Moab, certainly implied a lack of zeal for the Jewish religion which was tied closely to the land of Israel, and holidays which would only be celebrated in Israel. More seriously, leaving Israel eventually resulted in Naomi's sons intermarrying with the pagan women of the land. It can be difficult for someone in our culture to fully understand why this was such a serious matter. In Naomi's day and age, ethnicity and religion were closely connected in a way that it is not today. To marry outside of the Israeli nation was to marry outside the faith of God and to bring your family into a future of paganism, which could include such disturbing practices as human sacrifice, idolatry, and ritual prostitution. Such intermarriage, committed generations later by Solomon, would doom the nation and result in Israel splitting in two. Similarly, Ruth as a pagan Moabitess should not be seen as a likely candidate for God's compassion.

God's Compassion in the Mosaic Law

In many ways, the turning point of the story happens early in 1:16-18. Ruth renounces her Moabite religion to cling to Naomi. She declared that from that day forward, "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." As they returned to the land of Israel, they quickly benefited from God's compassionate nature as expressed in the Law God had given through Moses. Knowing that tragedy or bad decisions would result in poverty for some, God had included a series of "work-fare" type laws in the Mosaic law that ensured survival by harvesting a limited



amount of food from ANY Israeli citizen's fields. Secondly, God had given a number of laws designed specifically for the protection of widows and other "at risk" groups within Israel. One law gave a childless widow the right to marriage from a relative of her deceased husband. This enabled her to receive protection and provision in a way that was not available elsewhere. This also enabled the memory of the husband to be retained as the first son would be considered the heir and line of the original husband. This is why the book ends in 4:16 with the celebration of Obed's birth who was considered to be Naomi's heir and son, even though neither Ruth nor Boaz were directly related to Naomi. It is clear that Naomi saw this as a blessing from the hand of God. In our day and age we take for granted numerous protections that are rare outside of the modern industrialized world. But God instituted these laws over three thousand years ago!

The Compassion of Boaz

Boaz shows compassion for Ruth's plight throughout this book. He offers her far more than was required by the law. He offered her additional food, provision, and protection, and even had his workers "accidentally" leave extra grain out for her to harvest (2:16). His willingness to marry her was also an act of compassion. As a penniless widowed foreigner, there were many drawbacks to marrying Ruth. Even their first child would not really be considered his! And it was not really Boaz's responsibility; there was a closer kinsman who was technically responsible for marrying her. But Boaz married her because he saw past these shallower issues, and saw that she was a woman of deep loyalty and character.

The Compassion of Ruth

It is hard to imagine the difficulty of her situation. A widow in her day was at risk both physically and financially. To take on the additional difficulties of caring for her mother-in-law, and leaving her land that she had known all her life to come to Israel, showed true compassion. As a reward for her faithfulness and compassion, God is clearly identified as the one who sought to bless Ruth behind the scenes (4:13-14). What she did not know is that she had become the mother of a line of kings. She was the great-grandmother of King David (4:22) and was even part of Jesus' ancestral line (Matt 1:5).

Thoughts For Our Lives

Ultimately, compassion should be an act of faith before God. There are times in our lives when God calls us to step forward and help the helpless, and even the undeserving. Each of us should be aware that we do not deserve God's compassion, yet He lavishes it on us beyond what we ever realize. And just as in Ruth's story, our day-to-day choices can have repercussions beyond our imagination. May we learn to see God as the ultimate example of compassion, and the one who ultimately rewards our compassion.

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The Compass is the discipleship curriculum for Campus Crusade for Christ's Campus Ministry. It was created by Centerfield Productions, the field based division of CruPress. We'd love to hear your feedback on this lesson. Please write us at centerfield@uscm.org