

Ruth Part Five: Recalculating Route **By Pastor David Fields**

“We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turn then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road and in the case the [person] who turns back soonest is the most progressive.”

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

“Don’t urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

– Ruth 1:16-17

And these aren’t just words. Ruth shows her “loyal, committed love” over and over. She puts her hands to work...and hard work. Harvesting leftovers to provide for the two of them.

And when Naomi hatches this plan to propose marriage to Boaz, she agrees to take the risk. And then we have Boaz: well respected in the community, and he takes note and shows kindness to Ruth and Naomi. And when Ruth takes a risk, Boaz agrees, and takes that risk to marry a Moabite woman.

In the Old Testament, Moabites are often portrayed as an enemy of Israel. And in Israel’s Law code, like in Exodus 34, it prohibits the Israelites from making covenants with foreigners, including the covenant of marriage.

The concern is not about race – it’s not about ethnicity. The issue of “intermarriage” is a concern about attaching your life to someone who worships someone other than the One True God. The concern is that to marry outside of the people of Israel was to invite a commitment to false gods.

The New Testament also includes this same warning – not to marry someone who does not love God like you do. You would be headed down different paths – or end up compromising.

I. The Book of Ruth is A Powerful Corrective for Those Prone to Lose the Plot

A friend asked me this week: “Why did the Pharisees so deeply miss what God was doing through Jesus, his Son? Like, they were smart, and they *have the Bible and read it* – why were they so mistaken?”

The Pharisees of Jesus' day are an example of "Losing the plot."

It's very possible to *misread the Bible, and badly*. When you have power, and when you *love power more than you love God, more than you love truth*, you will want to keep that power. It's like how Gollum, in *The Lord of the Rings*, his love for the ring corrupted his heart to the point where he would be willing to kill to keep that power.

When it comes to the Bible, we might seek to read the parts we like and maybe ignore the passages that disrupt the ways we want to see the world.

The people of Israel, those who come from Abraham's line, were called, 'elected by God,' not just for their sake, but to hold out the hope of God to all nations.

And Ruth, this foreigner-migrant-worker-widow, she demonstrates faith in Israel's God, both in claiming allegiance to the Lord, and by living in ways that line up with God's will and ways – demonstrating loyal-love. This story shows her as enfolded into the people of God.

And Boaz, by marrying her, demonstrates his faith in God, that God is working to restore and bring healing to a widow and foreigner through his act of kindness to Ruth and Naomi. Boaz demonstrates what God commands for love of neighbour.

The book of Ruth stands as this powerful, biblical example of God's aims for his salvation to extend to all nations. That's the plot.

How might we "lose the plot"?

The Kingdom of God, that space where God's ways are *the ways*, cannot be easily fitted into one or the other of these opposing sides in the "culture wars." And yet people on both sides of the culture wars will often claim that "God, or history, is on our side, and therefore, we can legitimately aim at "winning" – at defeating the enemy."

At the heart of this drive to "win" is a sort of idolatry, the worship of power, or of an ideology. It's the fear of losing control.

Here's where we land. A Christian is someone who gives her or himself wholly to Jesus, the one who gave himself wholly for us. A Christian is committed entirely to loving and serving Jesus and the world in his name. Committed to listening to him and following him. We find ourselves washing feet, listening, praying, and seeking first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness – and leaving the results to God.

"For our struggle is *not against flesh and blood* but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms..." – Eph 6:12.

Power has several prizes
Handcuffs can come in all sizes
Love has a million disguises
But winning is simply not one
– Jon Guerra, “Citizens”

II. The Book of Ruth Reveals the Significant Role of Women in God’s Story of Salvation

“For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.”

– Ruth 4:15

It was thought that the ideal number of “sons” for a family to have was 7 or 8. So when these women say, “Ruth is better to you than 7 sons”, it means she is better than the commonly thought of ideal.

Like, there’s something about the way that Ruth has loved Naomi – that committed, loyal-love – where God, through the Scriptures is saying to us, “Take note! Pay attention.”

In a patriarchal society like ancient Israel – and all the surrounding nations as well, to be fair – this is a counterculture statement. It elevates the kind of faith and faithfulness of Ruth.

The Bible was written within a patriarchal culture. That’s true. And it’s true that some interpreters of the Bible and the Christian faith think that means the Bible is somehow “supporting” and “affirming” patriarchal structures. But I don’t think a careful reading of the Bible supports that claim, and I think the fact of this book being named after Ruth, and the way this text elevates her for her faithfulness is just one of the many reasons why I think a fair reading of the Bible leads to a true sense of equality between men and women.

III. The Book of Ruth pictures what it means *to be a community oriented to compassion*

“Individuals and communities who allow themselves to be shaped by texts like this and who make decisions based on the common good are, as Andrew Sloane suggests, “the kind of community that Yahweh, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, calls us to be (seen in, for instance, the picture of the early Christian community in Acts 2:4).”

– Marion Anne Taylor

IV. The Gospel through the Lens of Ruth

Christianity is the most “inclusive” exclusive claim. For it says, everyone is lost and in need of grace. No one can claim to be superior to anyone else. I think that matters. And everyone is welcomed to come to Jesus and find forgiveness and hope and healing. Everyone.

Ruth, with her experience as an outsider – an immigrant who is welcomed in as family – is in some ways, a microcosm of this gospel message. Moabites were seen as enemies of the Israelite community, and yet God is the one orchestrating this marriage of a Moabite woman with an Israelite man, and bringing about king David, and ultimately King Jesus.

Enemies brought into the centre. That's a picture of how God treats all of us. Though we were, as Paul says in Romans 5:10, "God's enemies," the reality is "we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son," welcomed home, and at great expense to God. As Guerra sings:

"I need to know there is justice
That it will roll in abundance
And that you're building a city
Where we arrive as immigrants
And you call us citizens
And you welcome us as children home."
– Jon Guerra, "Citizens"

The welcome of Ruth – and that she stands right at the heart of God's work through Israel, and ultimately in the coming of Jesus, the Son of God – means hope for all of us.

This book demonstrates how God is building a community, a people are committed to the just ways of life, to God-like, loyal-love.

Life Group Discussion and Reflection Questions

In the message, we saw how the book of Ruth functions to keep us from "losing the plot" as God's work this this book shows God's heart for all nations.

1. How would you, at this point, describe the "plot" of God's work?
2. How might you, or your peers, be prone to "miss" it? Why?
3. The Pharisees are an example of those who "lost the plot," and very badly, in Jesus' day.
Read John 7:37-52.
 - a. Contrast Nicodemus with the other leaders. What is the difference in their approaches to Jesus?
 - b. What can we learn from Nicodemus in a positive sense? Or from the negative example of the Pharisees?
4. What might it look like to "get back on the right path" for you?

Prayer: Take some time to give thanks to God for the book of Ruth and the way it helps realign us with Gospel hope. Pray for the needs to your group. Pray for our broader community, that as we begin the season of Advent, that the spiritual hunger of our city would lead people to find that Jesus is seeking them. Pray that our church community would be excited to invite guests to learn more about Jesus. Pray for those whom you might invite to our Christmas outreach event.