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09:35 09:34 09:33 09:32 DAVID KITCHEN 09:31

09:21 09:20 09:19 09:18 09:17 09:16 09:15 09:14

09:04 BIBLE IN TEN 09:03 09:02

08:52 08:51 08:50

08:40 ANY BOOK OF THE BIBLE 08:39 08:38 08:37

08:27 CRACKED IN TEN MINUTES OR LESS 08:26 08:25

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Ruth: love's journey

In the middle of the history books in the Old Testament, up pops a love story. It's set at the same time as the book of Judges. Ruth comes from Moab, a country that Israel was often at war with. So, in terms of mixed marriages, the tale of Ruth and Boaz is probably as controversial as it gets. The word 'redemption' occurs 23 times in this small book. It means taking on the cost of saving someone from evil – what true love will always do.

When you get married, you get married for life. At least, that's the idea. Settle down, have a family perhaps and be relatively happy ever after. So it was that Naomi married Elimelech. They had two sons – Mahlon and Chilion. It wasn't perfect. Rarely is. Poor harvests and the need to work took the family from Bethlehem to Moab but they got by and made a life for themselves.

Then, a nasty surprise, because when you say 'till death do us part' you don't expect it to happen any time soon. Elimelech died and left Naomi to cope with two growing lads, which she did... because she had to.

The boys married nice local girls: Orpah and Ruth. Happy ever after again. Except it only lasted about ten years. Two more deaths – sons this time – and three very lonely women.

Now remember that Naomi doesn't come from Moab. She's Bethlehem born and sometimes misses the place, especially when she hears the good times have returned to her country. So she says, 'Now or never. I'm going home.'

Wherever you go

Her daughters-in-law leave with her. That's the tradition. But Naomi worries that it's a daft tradition. 'You're not Bethlehem girls,' she says. 'Return to your own families where you can feel comfortable. You've been good to me, so may God be good to you. After all, you're still young enough to start again, find another man, make another home.'

Because they love Naomi, the goodbyes are full of tears. They tell her how they want to stay with her but she tells them the truth. 'I'm sorry but I can't help you to get married. In fact, I can't help you, full stop. However much I want to.'

Orpah sees the point and bids her mother-in-law a fond farewell. Ruth takes a different line. 'Don't ask me to leave,' she pleads. 'Where you go, I will go; where you live, I will live; your people will be my people; your God will be my God; and, where you die, so will I. Only death will separate me from you.'

Well, what could Naomi say? It wasn't sensible but it was lovely to be cared about so much.

Back home

When they arrive in Bethlehem, there's great excitement. You'd have thought that Naomi would be delighted, but it just makes her loss seem all the worse. 'Don't call me Naomi,' she grumps, 'Call me Mara, because God's made my life bitter. I left with everything; I've come back with nothing.'

That rather spoils the party. On the other hand, there is some truth in it. Naomi and Ruth are broke. Not a penny, not a prospect. That's when you need family and friends.

Now Naomi has a rich relative called Boaz on her husband's side of the family. Depressed, she does nothing about it... or anything else. But Ruth still has a bit of get-up-and-go. 'Let me follow the harvest workers,' she says, 'pick up the bits left behind. I might get real work if they see I'm keen.'

A small kindness

So she goes wherever she can and one of those places belongs to Boaz, not that she knows anything about that. As the day wears on, the boss arrives. Boaz spots her almost immediately. 'Who is *that* woman?' he asks his foreman.

'Oh, it's the foreign girl who came with Naomi. She's followed the harvest all day, started really early in the morning.'

Boaz strolls across and invites her to stick with *his* harvest. 'You'll be safe here,' he tells her. 'I've told the men not to take advantage of you. Follow the women and take a drink of water whenever you like.'

Ruth is embarrassed by this small kindness. 'Why should you do this for me? I'm just a foreigner.'

'Not true,' says Boaz with real seriousness. 'You're the one who has been faithful to Naomi way beyond the call of duty. I know what you've done for her. You deserve not only my protection but God's, too.'

It's the gentleness of it all that gets to Ruth. 'Even though I'm no one,' she tells Boaz, 'you've made me feel like someone.'

Mealtime comes and Boaz invites her to eat with them, and to take a share of the leftovers. Then, when it's back to harvesting, he tells his workers to make sure there's plenty left behind for her to gather.

Naomi is stunned when she gets home: 'Ten kilos of corn and free food! That is some field you've found.'

'Belongs to Boaz,' explains Ruth. 'He knows you. Oh, and I can go back whenever I want.'

Love among the barley

The year rolls on and signs of love in the air are... zero. Naomi begins to worry about Ruth again. 'You need a husband, plus you need a place of your own. Listen carefully. It's barley threshing party night over at Boaz's place. Get washed and slip into your posh frock. Then go across and join them. And do nothing until after the eating and drinking.'

Ruth follows Naomi's plan to the letter, snuggling down at the end of the celebrations close to Boaz. The message is unmistakable and, when Boaz's head clears sometime in the middle of the night, she whispers: 'I want to be yours, I want to marry you.'

Boaz is delighted: 'You could be running after young men right across town but you're not. There is *nothing* I'd like better than to be your husband.'

First, however, he needs the approval of one other family relative. So Ruth goes home, loaded as always with food and this time with a bundle of hope as well.

The end and the beginning

Boaz doesn't waste any time. That morning, he meets the one man who has a prior claim on Naomi's property and daughter-in-law. After talking it through, the man tells Boaz that he'd quite like the land but being responsible for Ruth would be too much for him.

So Boaz buys Naomi and Ruth's freedom, redeeming the land once owned by Elimelech. Having sorted out the legal niceties, Boaz can marry Ruth, which is clearly high on his agenda.

In an age of arranged marriages and family duty, this story pulses with the love of two not-quite-so-young people. The neighbours are just as thrilled as the happy couple. May you be rich, they tell them, may you be famous and have loads of children.

Now, Boaz was already pretty well-off at the start of this tale. As for children and fame, Ruth turns out, in time, to be King David's great-grandmother. And the last picture in the story is Naomi cuddling Ruth's baby boy, redeemed from the bad times by family loyalty and kindness. For once in this world, no one could possibly ask for more.

Ruth – what matters

This book is the reminder that God is for everyone. He's not bothered about what you look like or where you come from but how you behave, how you care for the people you meet. If that means crossing borders, looking for work or returning home without any certainties, sometimes it needs to be done. And it's also the book with the story of how love saves us where we least expect it.

Home
Exile
Love
Faith
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