

When Tragedy Strikes, Which Way Will You Choose?

Ruth and Esther are the two Bible books named after women. Benjamin Franklin was so fond of Ruth he pulled a prank on his cronies in Paris as the ambassador to France. He often attended the “Infidel’s Club,” a group of intellectuals who read literary masterpieces but spurned the Bible. He told them he found a piece of ancient literature worthy of their consideration. Then he read them the book of Ruth but changed the names and locations so they wouldn’t recognize it. When he finished, they raved that it was one of the most touching stories they’d ever heard and begged him to print it so the public could read it. He grinned and said, “It is already in print; it is a part of the Bible you ridicule.”

Ruth opens in a dire situation. Elimelech and Naomi fled from Bethlehem to Moab due to a fierce famine. It was only about 30 miles away, but distance in the Bible isn’t measured in miles, but by how far it takes someone from God. Bethlehem means “house of bread,” and is a fitting type of the church which should nourish the needs of hungry humanity. There they worshipped the one, true God—Yahweh. Moab, however, served the false idol Chemosh, to which human sacrifices were burned along with other pagan practices. (Moab was the son of drunken Lot by incest with his daughter when they fled the fire of Sodom—Gen. 19:30-37). Moab, an enemy of Israel, represented all that was evil. We see a picture of people backsliding, leaving the church (Bethlehem) for the world (Moab).

Ten years out of God’s will took a terrible toll. Their two sons married Moabite women, and disaster struck. Elimelech died first, then his two sons also died, leaving three destitute widows in a quandary about what to do next. When tragedy strikes, we all have the same three options of how we can react:

1. **Grieve:** We can be like Naomi who became so bitter in her grief that she blamed God for her misfortunes and insisted that her friends call her Mara (“bitter”) instead of Naomi (“pleasant”—Ruth 1:19-21). She complained how she went out full, but God brought her home empty. Her perspective was distorted by her pain.
2. **Leave:** Or, we can be like Orpah who kissed her mother-in-law goodbye and went “back to her people and to her gods” (idols), thinking that changing her situation would somehow remove her problems. Running from our problems never solves them.
3. **Cleave:** The third option is to cling to all we know is right and good even when life isn’t fair or doesn’t make sense. Naomi told Ruth to turn back to Moab like her sister, but she clung to her instead. Then she spoke the most inspiring lyrics of love and loyalty that are still used in weddings as vows, “Do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from following you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and worse, if anything but death separates you and me!” (Ruth 1:16-17).

Back in Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth began to rebuild their broken lives by gleaning in the fields of a rich landowner named Boaz. This was no mere coincidence. Albert Einstein said, “Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.” This was the obvious hand of providence, because Boaz was a kinsman of Naomi’s late husband, Elimelech. Boaz’s name means “in him is strength,” and he is a fitting type of Christ, our heavenly bridegroom and strong Redeemer. In eight of the nine times the word “kinsmen” occurs in the book of Ruth (KJV), it is translated from the Hebrew word *gaal*, which is rendered “redeem” or “redeemer” in other places. It means “to redeem (according to the Oriental law of kinship), to be the next of

kin (and as such to buy back a relative's property or marry his widow), avenge, deliver, (perform the part of near, next kin), kinsfolk, purchase, ransom, revenger." Under Mosaic law, it was the duty of a near kinsman to marry his relative's widow, to protect and support her and raise children with her so his relative's name would live on in posterity.

Boaz feared God and favored Ruth and gave her the protection and provision of his reapers. "When she got up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, 'Let her glean even among the bundles, and do not harm her. Also pull out some *grain* for her from the bundles and leave it so that she may glean it, and do not rebuke her'" (Ruth 2:15-16). When Ruth made overtures toward marriage, Boaz hesitated because there was another closer kinsman who had to be considered. When this kinsman waived his rights to Elimelech's estate, Boaz was free to marry Ruth. He rescued her from a lonely life of poverty and elevated her to the status of a treasured spouse, mirroring what Christ has done for His bride—the church. So, what kind of man was Boaz before he got married? *Ruthless!* (Sorry, I can't resist a good pun.)

Perhaps the reason Boaz was so sympathetic to Ruth's plight as a poor Gentile widow was the fact that his mom had a similar story. You see, Boaz's mother was Rahab, yes—the Gentile harlot who was spared the judgment of Jericho and then married one of the spies she hid named Salmon (Matt. 1:5). Amazingly, their son wed Ruth who conceived and birthed a son named Obed, who later had a son named Jesse, who sired a son named . . . you guessed it—David! So, in a series of miracles, a childless, destitute, Moabite, heathen widow, became a worshipper of Yahweh, the wealthy wife of Boaz, the esteemed great-grandmother of King David and one of only four Gentile women (along with Tamar, Bathsheba and Rahab) to be an honored ancestor of Jesus Christ (Ruth 4:21-22, Matt. 1:5). No wonder the women of Bethlehem said, Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you without a redeemer. May he become famous in Israel!"

(Ruth 4:14). Only God could turn such a terrible tragedy into such a tremendous triumph. Ruth could declare like Job, “I know that my Redeemer lives!” (Job 19:25) Now, if God did all that for Ruth, what will He do for you? {eoa}

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