

SINNERS & SAINTS

Ruth

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Our summer sermon series, Sinners & Saints, is drawing to a close, and next Sunday's sermon will be the last in our series. Today we're exploring the life of Ruth—the third woman who appeared in Jesus' genealogy. In Matthew 1:5 we read, "Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth." As we looked at the lives of Rahab and Tamar, I noted how unusual it is that women show up in Jesus' genealogy, and these weren't just any women. Rahab was a foreigner and also a prostitute. Tamar seduced and manipulated her father-in-law to become a mother. And Ruth, our subject today, was a foreigner, a native of Israel's enemy nation, Moab.

You may be wondering why I've placed so much emphasis on the women in Jesus' genealogy. I've highlighted Rahab, Tamar, and now Ruth in our current series because I'm convinced their appearance in Jesus' genealogy has great significance for us. I find it curious that people who aren't familiar with the Bible and with Christianity assume the Bible is out of touch with modern sensibilities about the nature and role of women. It's true the ancient cultures surrounding the Old and New Testament world didn't give women the standing they have in our culture and in many cultures around the world today, but in a world where women were devalued, God consistently called his people to value, honor, and respect women as people who have been created in his image. An early example from the Old Testament where women were granted status in Israel beyond what was common in the nations around them was when God instructed Moses to give the daughters of Zelophehad inheritance rights because there were no men in their family—an unusual practice at that time. In the New Testament, we see Jesus and the Apostle Paul viewing women as ministry partners in a culture where females were typically relegated to second-class status.

Despite the value the Scriptures give women, numerous denominations in our contemporary church setting view women as ineligible for pastoral ministry roles in the church based on statements the Apostle Paul wrote as he addressed specific situations in two New Testament churches. Yet in various New Testament letters, the Apostle Paul clearly identifies

women in his circle of ministry as pastors, church planters, and apostles. In Galatians 3:26–28, Paul wrote, “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28).

One of the most compelling arguments highlighting the value our Heavenly Father and the Scriptures place on women first came to my attention through New Testament theologian N.T. Wright. Wright points out that it was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and John, and a woman named Salome who were the first witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection. In a culture where women’s testimonies weren’t permitted in court because they weren’t believed to be credible witnesses, God chose three women to be the first witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection. Wright calls these women “the apostles to the apostles,” because they brought the message of Jesus’ resurrection to the 12 apostles.

I’ve chosen to highlight the stories of Tamar, Rahab and Ruth in our Sinners & Saints series, because I’m convinced their appearance in Jesus’ genealogy isn’t a coincidence. In the Old and New Testament and today, women were and are called by God to play integral roles in Jesus’ Church and in the advancement of his kingdom around the world. In our own church here at McBIC, pastors Susan, Jen and Cindy are invaluable team members on our staff, and I’m committed to supporting them and other women who sense God’s call to pastoral ministry.

Last week as we looked at the life of Samuel, I pointed out that while we tend to think God uses people of influence to accomplish his purposes, He often uses those who aren’t perceived as influential to do his work. In Samuel’s story, a woman named Hannah, who was unable to conceive a child, and later her young son Samuel, played an important role in bringing about spiritual renewal in the nation of Israel.

Today we’re exploring Ruth’s story. Ruth was a widow from the country of Moab, whose faithfulness to her mother-in-law and her trust in God opened the door for her to marry a man named Boaz and eventually be included in Jesus’ family line. Ruth’s story is found in the four-chapter book that bears her name. This small book is located in the Bible between the book of Judges and the book of 1 Samuel. As we walk through Ruth’s story, I encourage you to look for

the theme of God's protection, blessing and favor. There are times in Ruth's story when it appears God has abandoned Naomi—the woman who became Ruth's mother-in-law—and yet his protection and blessing remain.

I won't read the four chapters of Ruth in their entirety, but I'll read portions of this book to make sure you have the story line, starting with verse 1 of chapter 1:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. – Ruth 1:1-5

The beginning of this story is shared in a very matter of fact way, but there is a lot going on here. We're immediately told that these events occurred when the judges ruled Israel. While the book of Judges records some wonderful stories about Gideon, Samson, and Deborah, it was a dark time in Israel's history filled with violence, unlawfulness, and God's people frequently straying far from Him. Judges ends with this summary: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25).

Those words are followed by the account of Elimelek, Naomi and their two sons leaving Bethlehem for the country of Moab because there was a famine in their land. At first glance, that might seem like the smart thing to do. There's no food, so pack up and move to a place where there isn't a famine, but this decision to leave their homeland was in direct disobedience to God's desire for his people. Elimelek and Naomi left God's country in hope of finding provision in a foreign nation. They stepped away from God's protection to try and provide for themselves. While they were in Moab, their two sons married Moabite women, another

departure from God's instruction for his people to find wives from among their own people. And while apparently Elimelek and Naomi found food in Moab and Naomi's sons found wives, within ten years, her husband and her sons all died. Now Naomi found herself alone and seemingly unprotected in a foreign country that historically had been hostile to God's people.

Naomi, hearing that the Lord had come to the aid of his people and provided them with food, decided to go back home to Israel. If you were with us last Sunday, you heard me talk about the cyclical nature of the Old Testament. God blessed his people. When He blessed them, they became proud and turned away from God. Disaster in the form of famine, drought and foreign takeovers then put them in crisis. In their despair, they would call to God for relief. God would hear their cries, rescue his people, and restore them to prosperity. And then the cycle would repeat itself. Naomi and her family lived this cycle.

As Naomi prepared to go back to her homeland, her daughters-in-law, who were fond of her, said they'd go with her. Naomi told them that while life had been hard on them all, it was more bitter for her because "the Lord's hand has turned against me." She encouraged them to stay in Moab and find other husbands, but Ruth insisted that she would accompany Naomi. In words that have become famous and are sometimes quoted in weddings, Ruth said,

"Don't urge me to leave you or to 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

Through her words, we see that Ruth had not only grown to love Naomi, she had also been introduced to and was apparently following Naomi's God. When Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, arrived in Bethlehem, the town was stirred with excitement. They could hardly believe Naomi was back, and they asked, "Can this be Naomi?" The name Naomi means "pleasant," but Naomi responded to their question of whether it was really her by saying, "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara." Naomi explained her statement by saying,

“because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (Ruth 1:20–21).

Naomi was right: her life had been hard. Her bitterness was understandable. Losing a husband and two sons in the span of 10 years would be tough for anyone to bear. However, like many of us are prone to do, she re-wrote history. She said she went to Moab full and returned empty. The reality is she left Israel because she and her family were struggling to make ends meet and looking for a better life. Naomi was in a difficult place. Her husband had died young, her two sons had also died, and she was all alone in the world as a widow who was convinced God had turned his hand against her because her life had been so hard. But this is key: God hadn't forgotten Naomi nor had He deserted her.

After they settled in Bethlehem, Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth went out to harvest grain in the fields of a local farmer. It was a provision in Israelite culture that the poor who had no food could sustain themselves by gleaning from the edges of farmers' fields, or in this case, by following behind the workers and gathering up what they dropped or left behind. To make a long story short, Ruth ended up in the field of Boaz, a relative of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelek. Ruth continued to glean in Boaz's field throughout the harvest, and he was generous to her, instructing his workers to drop extra amounts of grain for her to pick up to take home to Naomi.

At some point in the story, Naomi made Ruth aware that Boaz, the farmer in whose field she was collecting grain, was a relative of hers and was in line to carry on Ruth's deceased husband's legacy by marrying his widow and producing a male heir. I briefly explained that practice two weeks ago during the sermon on Tamar. When a man who was married died without having a child, the protocol was for the man's brother or the male next in the family line to take his wife and produce an heir for the deceased. In Naomi's case, her husband and sons were dead, so the responsibility of providing an heir went down the line to other males in the extended family. As the story unfolds, we learn that Boaz became attracted to Ruth and took note of her kindness to her mother-in-law, Naomi. He was interested in marrying her, but

there was another relative who was closer to Naomi's husband and had the first rights of marriage.

When the harvest ended and Boaz and his workers were celebrating, Naomi encouraged Ruth to demonstrate to Boaz that she was interested in him marrying her by participating in a cultural ceremony that provided Boaz with the opportunity to claim Ruth as his wife. In the ceremony, Ruth would hang out in the barn by the threshing floor, and when Boaz lay down to sleep, she'd lift the blanket from his feet and lay down by his feet until he noticed her. I'll pick up reading the story at verse 7 of chapter 3:

When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet!

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family."

"The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I.¹³ Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning." – Ruth 3:7-13

This ceremony or practice seems strange to us, but the guardian-redeemer was designed as a protection measure to carry on the family line of a deceased relative and to protect his widow. The practice of spreading the garment over the woman by the man was a symbol of his willingness to protect and support her in a culture where unmarried women were

extremely vulnerable. The next morning Boaz went before the elders of the town of Bethlehem and expressed his desire to marry Ruth and carry on Boaz's family line. The man in front of Boaz who had the right to claim Ruth as his wife declined his right because he didn't want to hurt his own estate by dividing it with Ruth's son, so Boaz was given the rights of what was known as the guardian-redeemer, and he took Ruth as his wife.

Interestingly, both Tamar and Rahab are referred to in the conclusion of Ruth's story. Tamar is mentioned by name, and Rahab's husband, Salmon, is also mentioned. When the elders accept Boaz's proposal to become Ruth's guardian-redeemer, they said:

"May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." – Ruth 4:11–12

After Boaz and Ruth had a son they named, Obed, and the women of Bethlehem blessed Naomi with these words:

"Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." – Ruth 4:14–15

Naomi, who experienced such heartache in her life that she told people to call her Mara/bitter rather than her given name, Naomi/pleasure, was cared for, delivered, and protected by God even when things in her life seemed they couldn't get any darker. She experienced God's provision through a foreign woman named Ruth who was attracted to Naomi's God through her life, even though prior to encountering Naomi, all Ruth ever knew was the worship of pagan gods and goddesses.

So, what is God speaking to you through his Holy Spirit this morning? Have you ever or do you currently find yourself, like Naomi, in a place where bitterness rather than pleasure characterizes you and your life? At times we encounter difficulty through no choice or fault of our own, but other times, like Naomi, we end up in difficult spots and find ourselves blaming God, though if we were honest and looked more closely, we'd realize our choices contributed to us being where we are. Whether you're in a tough spot this morning due to choices you've made or what seems like bad luck, or a combination of both, understand God hasn't forgotten you. He is your protector and provider, and He's looking out for you even when you doubt his presence and his care and concern for you.

I love the words of Zephaniah 3:17: "The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."

My hope for each of us, whatever we find ourselves walking through, is that we're able to experience God's great delight in us, and we know that He loves and cares for us and is working out his purposes in our lives. If you'd like to have someone pray with you this morning because God is stirring something in your heart, I encourage you as we move into our time of response by worshiping in singing to go to one of the prayer partners who are standing on the sides of our worship center. Before we sing together, I'd like us to read the words of Zephaniah 3:17 together aloud to help embed them in our hearts and minds. "The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."