

Ruth (May 1)

Reading Ruth

A sledge of heavy timbers and black basalt stones rolls and crushes stalks of barley against the bleached, concrete-hard earth. Two boys sit atop the sledge, reining an ox, which casually circles the threshing floor. The unmuzzled ox lowers its head often and licks the floor, drawing up its share of the harvest. To the side, young men rake, scoop, and toss the stubble. As wind blows away the lighter chaff, the men catch the precious grain in their wicker scoops and dump it into clay jars for storage. Women and girls approach, bearing fresh flat bread and goat skins sloshing with wine. Eating, drinking, and dancing with family and neighbors will begin at twilight.

As you read Ruth, consider the bond of families and neighbors who shared the same threshing floors, suffered together through the dry years, and celebrated together in the good. The book of Ruth illustrates for us the frailty and danger of isolation and the life-or-death bond of family.

Background

The story is set in the time of the judges, a time characterized in the book of Judges as a period of religious and moral degeneracy, national disunity, and general foreign oppression. The book of Ruth reflects a temporary time of peace between Israel and Moab. Like 1 Samuel 1-2, it gives a series of intimate glimpses into the private lives of the members of an Israelite family. It also presents a delightful account of the remnant of true faith and piety in the period of the judges, relieving an otherwise wholly dark picture of that era.

Theme and Theology

The author focuses on Ruth's unswerving and selfless devotion to desolate Naomi and on Boaz's kindness to these two widows. He presents striking examples of lives that embody in their daily affairs the self-giving love that fulfills God's law. Such love also reflects God's love, in a marvelous joining of man's actions with God's. In God's benevolence, such lives are blessed and are made a blessing.

It may seem surprising that one who reflects God's love so clearly is a Moabitess. Yet her complete loyalty to the Israelite family into which she has been received by marriage and her total devotion to her desolate mother-in-law mark her as a true daughter of Israel and a worthy ancestress of David. She strikingly exemplifies the truth that participation in the coming kingdom of God is decided not by blood and birth but by the conformity of one's life to the will of God through the obedience that comes from faith. Her place in the ancestry of David signifies that all nations will be represented in the kingdom of David's greater Son.

Literary Features

The book of Ruth is a Hebrew short story, told with consummate skill. Among historical narratives in Scripture it is unexcelled in its compactness, vividness, warmth, beauty, and dramatic effectiveness – an exquisitely wrought jewel of Hebrew narrative art.

Blessings for Readers

The book of Ruth relates a beautiful story in the history of King David's family, illustrating how God guides history for the sake of his people. He works through suffering and redemption to preserve his people and to welcome the nations. These aspects of the book point to the birth of Jesus, the world's Redeemer, who descends from Ruth and Boaz.

Though the book of Ruth is not a love story, it beautifully illustrates the Lord's enduring love for you. As you read Ruth, consider how the Lord calls you to show love and faithfulness to your family and your neighbors, for whom Christ lived and gave his life.