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Ruth Overview (Part 1)



Bible Book Overviews - Steve Gregg

In this overview of the Book of Ruth, Steve Gregg highlights the strong undercurrent of God's providence in orchestrating events. The story follows an exceptional woman, Ruth, who becomes an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Written during the reign of David and attributed to the prophet Samuel, the book of Ruth is significant in tracing the ancestry of King David and ultimately leading to Jesus. The story showcases God's involvement in the life of a lowly Gentile woman who gave up everything to become part of Yahweh's religion and people.

Transcript

As you know, we're going to be looking at the book of Ruth tonight. We've been going through much larger books in this series because almost all the books of the Bible are longer than Ruth. There are some that are shorter, but not very many.

And of the books we've covered in this series so far, which has taken us from Genesis up to the present point in the Old Testament where we find ourselves, they've all been long books, which means since we cover them in a single evening, we've given only really kind of an introduction and overview because of the limits on our time. Now with Ruth, the book is short enough that we can actually look at the whole book in much more detail. It just won't occupy as much time as going through Genesis or Exodus or Leviticus or some of these longer books.

And Ruth is one of two books in the Bible that are named after a woman. And in both of these books, the main character is a woman. Now, there are many exceptional women in the Bible, in Genesis and in Exodus, you find very exceptional women, but they're never the main featured character in the story as in the book of Ruth.

And also, of course, the other book is Esther. Both of these women are interesting to consider in that Ruth was a Gentile woman who married a Jewish man, whereas Esther was a Jewish girl who married a Gentile man. And each of them played a central role in the progress of what God was doing in the world and through Israel.

In the case of Ruth, her significance is that she was in the ancestry of Jesus Christ. Now,

of course, Jesus isn't mentioned in the book of Ruth because he wasn't born yet. And this is an Old Testament book.

But David is mentioned. And of course, the Messiah was to be the seed of David and Jesus was the seed of David. So whoever was an ancestor to David was also an ancestor of Christ, which means that if Ruth and Boaz had not gotten together, as this story relates, then there would have been perhaps no David.

There would have been no doubt another man would have been raised up instead of David. But David, as he was a historical character, would never have been. Jesus, then, would never have been.

There would have been a Messiah, but it wouldn't have been him. Somebody else would have to come up. Now, of course, talking about what might have been, what alternatives God might have had, if things hadn't worked out a certain way, is not fruitful because things did work out the way they did.

And one thing we can see in the story is it was not an accident. And that is to say both Esther and Ruth are books that feature a strong undercurrent of the providence of God. That is, God is moving the story forward.

God is orchestrating things. This is seen in a remarkable way in the book of Esther, but we're not there tonight. But it's also seen in the book of Ruth.

So to say, well, if Ruth and Boaz hadn't gotten together, there would have been no David, at least not the David that actually did live, and no Jesus, at least not the actual Jesus who did live. There would have been somebody else, perhaps. But that if this had not happened, that part of the consideration is not really relevant because God was providentially moving in history to make it happen.

And we see that as we read the story. Now, the book was written probably by Samuel. It might not have been Samuel, but if it wasn't, it was a contemporary of Samuel.

The Jews' tradition holds that Ruth was written by Samuel the prophet. If it was, then it's obviously written by an inspired writer and belongs among the inspired canonical writings, and that's where we find it. If it wasn't Samuel, then we don't know who wrote it, but he would have been somebody who lived, at least whose life overlapped the period of Samuel's lifetime because the book was written during the reign of David, or at least, I should say, after David was anointed king.

Remember, David was anointed king by Samuel a good long time before he ever reigned in Israel. He was privately anointed in his father's house, and he was persecuted by the reigning king Saul for some years before David ever really did reign. But the author knew of David, which means it must have been written after David was anointed because David was a total unknown, even to Samuel, before the anointing.

We haven't gotten to that yet. We'll find it in 1 Samuel, but Samuel's told by God to go to the house of Jesse and anoint one of his sons, but Samuel doesn't know which one it's going to be. He doesn't know David from anyone else in Bethlehem.

The fact that David is mentioned means that David has, at least at the time of writing, become known to the author. It may well be after David was already king, in which case, of course, everybody knew him, but he was not as well known at the time of his anointing, and Samuel would have been the first to know of his specialness because God revealed it to him when he anointed him. In any case, whether Samuel wrote it or not, it was a contemporary with David because, as I said, David is now mentioned at the very end of the book.

The last word in the book of Ruth is David, as the last verses give a short portion of the genealogy of David from actually from Perez, the son of Judah, on down to David. In fact, the genealogy ends at David, which means it doesn't have Solomon or Rehoboam or the other kings of David's line, which it probably would if it was written after David's time. There'd be no reason to stop the genealogy at David if there had been another king or two or three of his line who'd reigned since David.

The fact that Solomon is not mentioned and that David is suggests that whoever wrote it knew of David and did not know of Solomon at this point, and that's what this genealogy points out. Now, we know then essentially when it was written. It was written at the time of David, and certainly one of the reasons it was written is because it's about David's ancestors.

It's a story, a colorful story, about something in the ancestry of King David and therefore of Jesus because Jesus descended from David. So to the Christian as well as the Jew, a story like this is relevant. The degree to which it commands our interest will vary from person to person.

We were saying before we began the study tonight that Ruth doesn't have the kind of action and adventure that you find in some books of the Bible. Genesis and Exodus are loaded with action and adventure. So is Joshua and Judges, full of assassinations and wars and miracles and deliverances, all kinds of things in those books, and that makes them very exciting books.

They hold our attention. This book is a very quiet book. It's about a family and the death of all the men of the family and how God used that circumstance to set up a situation that would lead to a marriage that would be the marriage that would eventually produce David's line.

Now, Ruth and Boaz, the men she marries in the book, are the parents of Obed, and Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David. So Ruth and Boaz were David's great-grandparents. Interestingly, as you read the genealogy at the end of the

book, and it's the last few verses in the book, verses 18 through 22, it gives the genealogy at the end, and of course it's clear what the purpose is because it leads up to David and says no more.

It gives us the background of David, yet it tells us some other interesting things, and actually Matthew's gospel, which gives us the genealogy of Jesus, apparently borrowed some of the information from this book because this book has some information that you don't really get much elsewhere, and that is, among other things, that Boaz, who is the hero in this book, is the son of Rahab the harlot by a Jewish man named Salmon. Salmon was a Jew, and Rahab was a Canaanite from Jericho, and when she converted to Judaism, as Ruth did out of a pagan religion, then Rahab and her husband Salmon gave birth to Boaz, and Boaz also married a Gentile woman, Ruth. Now when I say they gave birth to Boaz, I'm just going by what the genealogy says.

Many people say that the genealogy might have some missing parts, and they sometimes do. For example, when you read Matthew's genealogy of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1, there are several kings in sequence of Judah that are left out of the listing, showing that sometimes these genealogies are not intended to be taken as complete, but the high points are in them. One thing that makes it difficult to take the genealogy at the end of Ruth completely literally is that Ruth, I should say Rahab, was contemporary with Joshua, which was before the conquest of Israel, Israel conquering Canaan, and before the whole period of the judges, by about 25 years.

And yet, she's only four generations before David. Now the time between Joshua and David is probably a good 400 years. And yet, we've only got five generations mentioned here.

If Ruth, well her husband Boaz, was the son of Rahab, that would have been at the beginning of the book of Joshua, that Rahab married Solomon, and sometime in Joshua's 25 years of leadership, Boaz would have been born. But then there's like 325 years of the period of the judges, and then 40 years of Saul's reign, before David becomes king. We're talking almost 400 years between Rahab and David, and yet we've got Rahab being Boaz's mother, and David being Boaz's great-grandson.

It's possible that these people lived, you know, 100 years each and so forth. After all, in the Old Testament we do find people living very long compared to now. But still, the distance between generations is not usually 100 years in biblical stories, although it can be.

Anyway, there is a possibility that this creates a problem, and there is therefore a possibility that some names, some generations are left out. That is to say that Rahab and Solomon may have had a son whose name is not preserved, and that son may have had a son whose name is not preserved. And that son may have had a son whose name is not preserved, and that son became the father of Boaz.

But in the listing of the genealogies, sometimes it skips over the lesser names, or the names of lesser importance, and moves right to the high points of the genealogy. It's hard to say. We don't need to know.

Some people are really concerned to know all those things. I'm not. I don't care if some additional names are left out or whatever.

That's hardly necessary. The important thing is that, in fact, Ruth is an ancestress of David and therefore of Christ. And that's what makes her book valuable.

That's what makes her book important. And so that's what we know about the time and the authorship of the book. We don't know who wrote it, but we know the Jews believe Samuel did, and Samuel lived at the very time that the book was written.

Samuel did write. We know that Samuel wrote a book, and we know that Samuel anointed David, and therefore Samuel would have an interest and the ability to write this little piece of David's history, if he wished to. Who else might have had that interest or that ability, we don't know.

There might have been others. But there's no reason to seriously question the Jewish tradition that Samuel wrote it. Now I want to go through the story rather quickly, and then I have some other things to say about the book, the value of the book, and the possible typology of the story in the book.

But the book is very short, only 85 verses long, and I want to just kind of go through it. I'm not going to comment on everything. I recently listened to my old lectures from the 80s on Ruth, and boy, I went into a lot of detail on things then, and I realized that I shouldn't try to do that tonight.

So I'm going to try to skim a little bit, but I'm not going to leave anything out as far as the story itself. So let's look at the book of Ruth, chapter 1. Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled. So we have the setting in time.

This was during the book of Judges. It's not at the end of the book of Judges. It's just during that sometime.

Just like we saw that the book of Judges had some chapters at the end that were like we would say appendices to the book. They were stories that probably happened at earlier stages in the book but had been left for the end to be added because they would have broken up the narrative, the organized narrative of the book up to that point. The Bible writers do that sometimes.

They'll tell the story without interruption, but some things happened during the time that they didn't stop to tell you about, so they'll stick it in at the end as sort of an appendix. And Ruth could be seen just like the last five chapters of Judges as an appendix to the

book of Judges. And of course the Jews believe that Samuel wrote the book of Judges also.

So this is set in the period of the judges that there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech. The name of his wife was Naomi.

The names of his two sons were Malon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there. This is not a particularly important family, although they seem to have been rather well off financially.

Now whether you're well off financially or not doesn't help if there's a famine. You can have all the money in the world, but you can't eat money. You have to eat food.

And if there's no food in your country, then you might take your money and go to another country where you can buy food. And that may be what happened. The reason I say they seem to have money is because certain things that are said later in the story make it sound like Elimelech, first of all, he was a landowner.

He had some land. And Naomi, when she does come back from Moab to Bethlehem, their hometown, she says, I went away full and I returned empty. Like they were not poor when they made this move.

It wasn't for lack of money. It was for lack of available food in their land. Now, not everyone in Bethlehem, Judah left, so there must be enough food to sustain some population.

But it's possibly the richer people who are less willing to settle for sparsity. And so there's it's probable this was a fairly affluent family. We know that Elimelech was also related to Boaz.

He was a close kin, possibly a brother or a cousin. And Boaz was wealthy. So they seem to be from a fairly wealthy clan, but not willing to stay and rough it out in Bethlehem when there's a famine.

Apparently, there was enough to eat to survive because other people did, but they wanted something probably a little more comfortable. So they moved to Moab. Now, Moab was a country named after the oldest son of Lot.

Lot was Abraham's nephew. He lived in Sodom. And at the time that God decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, he pulled Lot and his two daughters and his wife out of Sodom and told them to run for the hills.

Lot's wife did not get very far. She violated a command, turned around, looked back, was turned into a pillar of salt. But Lot and his two daughters made it safely to a cave where

they apparently spent the rest of their lives.

There's a rather scandalous story that attaches to this. Lot got both of his daughters pregnant. And the older daughter bore a son named Moab, and the younger a son named Ammon.

And the Ammonites and the Moabites were the people descended from these sons or grandsons, if you want to call them, of Lot. They were both sons and grandsons. They were sons because he fathered them, and they were grandsons because they were the children's daughters.

So that's kind of a strange arrangement. But that's obviously a scandalous arrangement, a scandalous thing. And therefore, Moab and Ammon, you know, were viewed with disgust and shame by the Jews.

And the Moabites, one of these two, were also enemies of the Jews, and they often fought against them in later years. However, Moab was nearby. It was across the Dead Sea, or what was called the Salt Sea then, on the east of Israel, an easy place to get to.

And apparently, the famine wasn't affecting that part so much. There was food there, and so they went there. Interestingly, the town they lived in before they moved was Bethlehem.

Now, the word Bethlehem literally means house of bread. And there were more than one town called house of bread. Probably a lot of the areas in Israel that produced a lot of grain could be referred to as house of bread in different parts.

And, you know, it would be like the granary of the area. Bethlehem, the house of bread, was out of bread, apparently. They were not doing well when Elimelech decided to leave.

And so he took his wife and his two sons, who probably were adults at that time, young adults in all likelihood, and they moved to Moab. Now, Elimelech dies in verse 3. So, although he's the patriarch of this family that dominates the whole story, he doesn't get past the third verse in the whole story before we lose him. He's still significant after his death, as we'll see later on, but he's dead.

He's gone. So, Naomi is now a widow. The two sons are orphans.

However, they're adult orphans, and they also take wives. So, since they were Moab, they married Moabite women. Some people think that was a moral compromise on their part, and it probably was of sorts.

The Bible did not, the law did not forbid marriage to Moabites. But it did say that the children of Moabites could not enter the tabernacle until the tenth generation. So, even though it was not technically forbidden for a Jew to marry a Moabite, the person who did

so was basically consigning his children to being not able to go into the Jewish tabernacle, which seems to me that somebody who is a devout Jew, who cared about the spiritual welfare of his children, would not choose a Moabite wife.

Now, I want to say that when the children of a Moabite could not enter the tabernacle until the tenth generation, that's the way it reads in the book of Deuteronomy, but it's very possible that what it means is a person whose father is a Moabite. Because a mother often took on the identity of her husband, of course. And in the case of Ruth, we find that she even takes on the religion of her husband.

And Orpah, the other girl who Chileon married, might also have converted to Judaism. We don't know. It's a little different.

The law is somewhat different about Jews marrying somebody who's converted to Judaism. Because a person could do that in the Old Testament as well as now. And, for example, we mentioned Rahab married a Jewish man.

Well, Rahab was a Canaanite, and the Jews were forbidden to marry Canaanites, but Rahab was converted to Judaism, to the God of Israel. And therefore, it may not have been considered to be wrong. Because the main concern God had about Israel marrying pagans was not a racial concern.

There's never any evidence in the Bible that God is against interracial marriage, but he is against interreligious marriage. He doesn't want his people marrying people of false religions. And therefore, he forbade marriage to the Canaanites.

And specifically, he said, because they will turn your hearts away from God. But when a Canaanite actually becomes a worshiper of God, that perhaps changes the story a bit. Likewise, if a Jewish man married a Moabite girl who had converted to Judaism, she was a proselyte.

And therefore, it may be that their children might not be regarded the offspring of Moabites. Because they'd have the Jewish religion, a Jewish father, a mother who was converted to the faith, and part of the nation of Israel now. So, some people say that Maalon and Chilion, the sons of Elimelech, were making a very bad choice by marrying Moabite girls.

But we don't know that these Moabites did not embrace immediately the religion of these Jewish men. In which case, that would certainly change the moral status of those marriages. And we do see that Ruth, a Moabite, not only married Maalon, but after he died, she eventually married Boaz.

And the whole Jewish community rejoiced that he married her. She clearly was a convert to Judaism, but she was a Moabite. So, it may be that there was no stigma about marrying a Moabite who was converted.

Again, God's not concerned about interracial marriage. He's concerned about interfaith marriage. That's why the New Testament tells us not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.

But he says that God doesn't care a thing about race. There's no Jew or Gentile, Greek or barbarian, Scythian or free, as far as God's concerned. And Christ, all are one.

So, as long as you're married within the faith, the Bible doesn't ever express concern about marrying outside your race. Having said that, though, I might just, before going on to another point, give this caveat. A lot of times when you're marrying another race, you're marrying another culture as well.

And when you marry cross-culturally, there can be difficulties and adjustment. It's not morally wrong. But, you know, when you choose a spouse, it's always nice to have as many things in common as possible.

Because marriage is hard enough. Even when you've got a great deal in common with each other, marriage has its challenges. The more culturally different you are from your spouse, the more difficulties there are.

And sometimes an interracial marriage might be really intercultural, too. Even if they're of the same faith. Because Christians in Japan or Korea, for example, or China, might have very, very different cultural ways of looking at life and marriage and child raising and things like that.

Than Christians in America or South America or somewhere else like that. So, anyway, these boys both married interracially. But we don't know that it was an interfaith marriage.

Because we do find that at least Ruth and perhaps Orpah had embraced Yahweh, the God of Israel, instead of the gods of her people. The main god of the Moabites was Chimash. Chimash is the same god that other nations refer to as Moloch.

And Moloch slash Chimash was a god who had a goat's head and a human body. And they would burn live infants in the arms of the statue of Moloch. So they weren't killed and then burned, they were burned alive.

And so it was a hideous pagan religion. And these girls apparently left that religion in order to marry these Jewish men. Now, unfortunately for them, the two sons died also.

The name of Malan and Chilian, the Hebrew names have meanings, but it's not entirely clear what their meanings are. Some scholars say that Malan means joy or ornament. Others say Chilian means song or perfection.

Those are very positive meanings. But if you change around the vowels a little bit in the

words, and remember the Hebrew text doesn't have vowels in it. So if you add different vowels, some scholars think the names mean sickly and pining, which are very negative terms.

Now you might think, well, why would somebody name their child sickly or pining? Well, if they're a sickly child, lots of times people named children after something that was a characteristic of theirs. Edom, Esau means hairy. Why was he called hairy? He came out of a womb covered of hair, the Bible says.

He was nicknamed Edom, which means red. Well, it turns out his hair was red too, just like we might call a redhead today, red. He was called red.

So, I mean, sometimes the names that are given to the children actually are descriptive of their conditions at birth. And so these boys who died very young might have been sickly. They might have been of weak constitution from birth.

Their names might even suggest it. Though, again, there's not widespread agreement as to what the meaning of their names are. So we won't worry too much about that.

In verse three, then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died and she was left with her two sons. Now, they took wives of the women of Moab. The name of one was Orpah.

The name of the other was Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. Dwelt there about ten years.

Then both Malan and Chilian also died. So the woman, that is Naomi, survived her two sons and her husband. So she had to go through the grief of normal widowhood and then, of course, the loss of children.

I would imagine losing a child would be much harder than even losing a spouse. I've lost a spouse to death before. I've never lost a child, not yet.

And I can only imagine it would be even worse to lose your own child. But she lost both children and her husband. There was no more males in her family.

She was a widow. And once a woman has died, if she has two sons, she hopes that they'll grow up and be prosperous and they'll help support her when she's old and helpless. And now they're dead.

Now there's three widows. And this is how the story is set up for us at the very beginning. Now we're not told how they died.

We're not told that they died under the stroke of God or the judgment of God. Although Naomi, when she talked about the death of her husband and her sons, talks about it as if the hand of the Lord has been severe against her. Interesting, she doesn't say against her husband or her sons, but against her.

She saw the loss of these men of the family more as a trial to her, because she had to survive it. She had to go through it. So she saw this as God doing something harsh to her.

But whether it was something harsh to them or not, we are not told. Some people in the Bible die under the stroke of God because he's angry at them. We're not told that this is the case here.

We're just told that this was a very unfortunate woman to lose as much as she lost in this way. So, what's she going to do? There's no men in the family to support these three widows. Now you might say, well, they can just go and get jobs.

No, they could do that today, maybe. But back then, that wasn't really the way things went for women. Women, if they were widowed or divorced, they generally didn't have a recourse for survival.

Unless they had, well, a few things they could do. One is they could go back to their father's house and live with their father until he died or until they could remarry. Now, Naomi was not a young woman, and her father might not have even been living.

And she speaks after this as if she doesn't have any real prospects for marriage or any hopes of it in the future. Another thing a woman could do if she was widowed or divorced would be beg. But begging was a shameful thing, and people mostly didn't want to do that.

She could sell herself into slavery or even prostitution. That's what some women ended up doing. There just weren't very many options for women.

There were none really good options. It was really a tragic thing for a woman to be widowed. But if a widow had adult sons, they would be her security.

They would be, they'd care for her. But now she had her sons dead, too, so she was really bereft. She was what Paul in 1 Timothy 5 calls a widow indeed.

Paul gives instructions to Timothy that the widows who are widows indeed in the church should be supported by the church. But a widow indeed is one who doesn't have any family members to support them. He goes on to say, but if she has children or nephews, then let them support her.

Well, she didn't have any children or nephews now, so she was a widow indeed. And in the New Testament time, if she was in the church, she would have been supported by the church. But that's not the arrangement she lived under.

She lived in Moab, away from even her own people. And so it's not clear how she survived, except, of course, if my speculation that Elimelech was somewhat wealthy is

correct, then she would have been able to live for a while, at least on what he left her. But still, she's bereft.

I mean, I'm sure that money is the least of her griefs at this time, and would be to anyone who'd lost two sons and a husband in rapid succession. This all happened within a decade. It says in verse 6, Then she arose with her daughters-in-law, that she might return from the country of Moab.

For she had heard that the country of Moab, heard in the country of Moab, that the Lord had visited his people by giving them bread. In other words, the rains had come back, or the crops had been good again. Suddenly, the famine was over.

But it was ten years later, as we'll see. And so she'd been away for a long time. She still had people who knew her, former neighbors and so forth, who recognized her when she came back, though she looked quite different, apparently.

And she decided it's time to go back to where I at least have some people, people who are my same race and religion, at least. Therefore, she went out from that place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her. And they went on their way to return to the land of Judah.

And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each to her mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.

Now it's interesting, she says, go back to your mother's house, not your father's house. Normally you'd go back to your father's house. And that doesn't mean that their mothers were also now widows, which is a possibility.

But it may be that she's just contrasting it with, why are you in your mother-in-law's house? You should be in your own mother's house. The contrast being that, you know, I'm your mother-in-law. You have real mothers at home.

You can go back and be with your real mom, not your mother-in-law. And she said, you know, hopefully you'll find husbands. You're still young, and you don't have any children, so you're eligible for finding happiness with a new husband somewhere.

Go, I'm leaving here. Go back to your homes and hopefully find new husbands. He said, you've dealt well, kindly, with the dead and with me.

This suggests that both these girls were good wives to their husbands, and that they had been good to her. They had good relationships, but it's time for them to part company. So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept, and they said to her, surely we will return with you to your people.

So both of these girls actually preferred their mother-in-law over their own mothers, and even over their prospects of remarriage, which is really something, because to be a widow young and never to remarry would mean to be, generally speaking, in poverty for the rest of your life. Now you might say, well, they could remarry even if they went back to Bethlehem. They could, but that would be much less likely to be a place where they'd find eligible men who want to marry Moabite women.

There's always a stigma on being a Moabite in the land of Israel, and therefore going to Israel is not as likely to produce new husbands for them as staying in their own land. But they'd rather go to Israel. They'd rather go with Naomi.

But Naomi said, turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters. Go, for I am too old to have a husband.

If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them until they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters, for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord is not against me. Now, what she's saying is under the Jewish and apparently other Middle Eastern customs, the Jewish law and the customs of the Middle East, if a man died childless, his brother was to step up and marry the widow and have children, and the first son would be named after the deceased husband so that his name would be not cut off from his people. Now, this was actually a part of the Jewish law.

It's called the law of levirate marriage, but it was also around before the law because we know that when Judah had three sons, one named Ur, one named Onan, and one named Shalah, Ur was married to a girl, and then he died childless, and Onan, his brother, married her, and then he died childless. And Shalah, the remaining son, Judah was reluctant to give him to her, and he was young. He says, you know, he's too young to marry you, but go away now.

When he's old enough, I'll call for you. Well, you know, it's clear that this is long before the law. These people are just Middle Eastern people, and they're not part of any religious system or law, but it was understood in that culture as it would not be in ours that it's a tragedy for a person to die and leave no offspring.

That's the only way they knew how to have immortality. There's no reference to immortality in the Old Testament, and therefore, in Old Testament times, people didn't know what happens after you die. They didn't know if there's anything more after you die, but they did know that if they leave some children, they'll be remembered in another generation.

If there's grandchildren, great-grandchildren, if their line goes on and on, there'll be someone remembering them. They'll be immortalized in their offspring. That was all they

had in terms of their understanding of immortality in those days.

So it was considered very tragic for a man to not have any offspring because then it was not known what would become of him after he died. Maybe that's his one chance at immortality, as it were, is shot. And so even before the Jewish law included this idea of leverite marriage, it's called leverite because the Latin word lever means brother-in-law, the brother-in-law marriage.

Obviously, it's not the Bible that uses that term for it because the Bible wasn't written in Latin. But later scholars who spoke Latin used the word leverite to speak of this particular law. But it was in the law.

It was also a custom of the people of the time. And she said, I don't have any more sons in me. I probably will never marry again.

I'm old. Even if I did have a husband, could I have any more children? And even if I did, would you wait for them to grow up so you could have husbands again? In other words, going with me is a dead end for you girls. You're much better off going back where you came from and you've got a future there.

You don't have a future with me. And so she keeps telling them this. And so Orpah actually agreed to this.

It says, then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. By the way, the name Orpah, this is just a little interesting information.

My wife read this somewhere, and it's allegedly true that Oprah's mother named her after Orpah, but had misspelled it on the birth certificate. So I think Oprah's probably more famous than Orpah today, but this name Orpah was the inspiration for Oprah's mother naming her Oprah, but she spelled it wrong. Anyway, that's not a joke.

That's apparently a true story. So we have a contrast here between Orpah and Ruth. They both love Naomi, clearly.

And Orpah kissed her and then left, but Ruth clung to her. And that's a different degree of commitment, obviously. You kiss somebody if you have affection for them.

You cling to them if you're devoted to them. Having affection for someone is not the same thing as being devoted to them. After all, Judas kissed Jesus too, but he wasn't devoted to him.

But the disciples, Peter and the others, said, Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. We're not going anywhere. No matter how discouraging it is to follow you, no matter how many people are out to kill you, you have the words of eternal

life.

We're with you all the way to the end. At the last supper, Peter said, I'm going to go wherever you go. I'd never deny you.

I'd die for you, Lord. Of course, his resolve was tested and he didn't do very well. But the truth is that this is a very different kind of commitment than just giving someone a kiss and then leaving.

And look what Ruth says when she clung to her. Here's what she said. Naomi said to Ruth, Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods.

Return after your sister-in-law. Now, it's interesting because Naomi is encouraging her to go back to her paganism. Naomi doesn't have that much faith, really.

I mean, Naomi is no doubt not a bad person, but she's also not exemplary. She didn't go back to your gods. Why? Because if you follow my god and my religion, you're never going to have a husband.

You're going to be poor. You're going to be a widow for life. Now, it seems to me like a woman of faith would have said, You know, even if you're a widow for life, even if you're poor, even if you have hardship, following my god is worth it.

Following my god is the way to go. I'd say that. I'd tell people that any day.

Even if you're persecuted, even if you're poor, even if your friends and family and your own spouse hate you and leave you, it's still worth it to follow Jesus. But Naomi didn't have that opinion. She says, You know, it's not worth it to go with me and be part of my religion and part of my family and so forth.

Go back to your gods. Go back to your home. And Orpah did, but Ruth wouldn't.

And look what Ruth said. Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave you or to turn back from following after you. For wherever you go, I'll go.

Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people should be my people. Your god, my god.

Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried. The Lord do so to me and more also.

If anything but death parts you and me. You may have actually heard these words uttered at weddings. Some people have adopted this little speech as wedding vows, and they're very good ones, although it's interesting.

It was a young woman talking to her mother-in-law, not a marriage. But it certainly is the kind of commitment that people make when they're getting married. You know, I'm not going to leave you.

I'll go where you go. I'll live where you live. I'll die where you die.

I'm going to, your people are my people. Your god is going to be my god. Now, it's clear that Ruth was saying, I'm going to be a Jew from now on.

I was born a Moabite, a follower of Chimash, but I'm going to be a Jew. I'm going to follow Yahweh. I'm going to be like you.

And I'm going to not only be there as long as you're there. When you're dead, when you're gone, that's not going to move me. I'm going to be buried where you get buried, even though it may be years after you die.

I'm permanent here. And she said, may God do so to me and more. If anything but death separates us.

What's that, may God do so to me and more? We've encountered that already in some of the other earlier books, and it comes up again in Samuel and Kings. It's a very typical way of taking an oath in the Bible, in the Old Testament. Most scholars believe that the words were accompanied with some gesture.

Maybe a gesture of someone like stabbing themselves in the chest or drawing a finger across their throat, saying, may God do so to me and more than that, if I break this oath. May God do that to me. In other words, they're invoking a curse and disaster upon themselves, death upon themselves, at the hand of God.

May God kill me. May God strike me dead if I break this oath. That's a very common thing.

David talked that way to Jonathan. Jonathan talked that way to David. You'll find people making oaths in the Old Testament with that very expression.

God do so to me and more, if I break this promise. This really is good wedding vows. Even if people don't use these vows, these words at weddings, people need to understand the difference between kissing and clinging, between feeling affectionate towards someone, as Orpah felt toward Naomi, and being devoted to somebody for life, like Ruth was.

She was committed to her mother-in-law the way that married couples would be committed to each other, but also the way that Christians would be committed to Christ. Many people feel affection toward Christ, but they don't cling to him. Their loyalty is tentative.

They'll follow him as long as things are going well, but they won't follow him if things get too hard. They'll stay in the marriage if things are going well, but they won't stay in their marriage if things get too hard. The ability to be faithful and be committed and to keep a

commitment till death is simply a dying quality in modern culture.

People make promises at the wedding altar, and they break them often at the drop of a hat. Now, most people who divorce don't say it's at a drop of a hat. They think it's a major thing.

Our society is such drama queens that very slight things become very major things if our happiness is interrupted by them. But, I mean, these people, she's looking at the prospect of never marrying, ever, never having children, and being a poor beggar, possibly, for all she knows. Now, there was another option for the poor in Israel, and that was they could glean.

If it was harvest season, and it happened that it was, they could go into any field where harvesters were gathering the grain, and they could glean. Now, gleaning means you take what's dropped or left behind or neglected by the reapers. The reapers, and under the law, the law said that when you reap your fields, don't take every head of grain.

If something falls on the ground, don't go back and pick it up. Leave it for the poor. So the reapers would go through, and they'd gather what they did, and some grain, some heads of grain would fall on the ground, and there'd be a few left stuck on the stalk that were a little more stubborn.

And the poor were allowed to follow the reapers in the field and gather up what was left. That's called the gleanings. I knew a Christian or cultic group, they were called, I think they were more cultic, who used to basically eat entirely out of dumpsters behind markets, and stuff like that.

They'd go and find all kinds of food there, edible, and they'd love to tell me about all the great finds they had. They called it urban gleaning. And that is urban gleaning.

The stuff that the people who buy food don't buy. Leave behind, that's the poor gleaning it from the dumpster. It's not a way I'd like to live.

But you know what? There are people in the Philippines and Manila who live on garbage dumps and eat what they find there. I mean, we're above doing that because we're too pampered, but there are people that poor. And the poor in Israel were allowed to go behind and pick up grain.

That had been dropped. And so that was going to be what's going to be the salvation of these widows. Initially in the story, but now they're coming back.

So when she saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, Naomi stopped speaking to her. They stopped trying to dissuade her. Now it was the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem.

And it happened when they had come to Bethlehem that all the city was excited because of them. And the women said, is this Naomi? And she said to them, don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara.

For the almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi? Since the Lord has testified against me and the almighty has afflicted me.

Now, the name Naomi means pleasantness in Hebrew. That's not ambiguous. All scholars know that Naomi means pleasantness.

Mara means bitterness. It's the root of the modern English name Mary or in Hebrew Miriam. Mary means bitter.

When Israel came out of Egypt, one of the first places they found water was the pools of Mara. They called it that because the water is too bitter to drink. Although through a miracle, God made it potable and they did drink it successfully.

But they called the place Mara because of the bitter water. And so she says, don't call me pleasant. God has been hard on me.

I don't want to be pleasant. Call me Mara, bitter. Now, I don't know if she's just saying, don't misrepresent me as a person who's had pleasant, a pleasant life.

I've had a very bitter life. Or I don't know if she's saying, I don't want to be pleasant anymore. I want to be bitter.

Some people actually do choose that. Naomi was not a bad woman. But again, she wasn't the most, the greatest woman of faith.

Not that she didn't have any, but she obviously not everything she says or does is exhibiting great faith. She does recognize her afflictions as coming from the Lord, from Yahweh, from the Almighty, as she calls him. But she's not happy about it.

She's not so sure that God has done the right thing. Now, today, when we go through hardships and suffer disasters, Christians often deny that God is in it. Sometimes Christians say, oh, that's the devil.

And God doesn't ever allow those things to happen. He must have been, you know, asleep or gone on vacation or something when that happened because he didn't stop it. But only the devil does bad things.

Other Christians recognize like Job did and like Jesus did and like Paul did, that sometimes thorns of the flesh are given to us. Sometimes the cup, it's the cup the Father has given me that I have to drink, as Jesus said. It's as Job said, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away.

Shall we receive only the good things from the Lord, not the evil things also, he said. These are examples of people who recognize that God is in it. God is in our lives, circumstances.

Jesus said the hairs of your head are numbered. He said not even a bird falls to the ground without the will of your father. How much less is anything going to happen to you without the will of your father? If something bad happens to you, God may not have done it, but he didn't stop it.

And to suggest that God couldn't stop it is to introduce all kinds of scary things in your theology. A God who can't stop the devil? What kind of God is that? Might as well worship the devil. He's stronger than God.

Now, there is no devil who's stronger than God. There are no people who are stronger than God. There's no one who can bring disaster into your life unless God allows it.

And the God who loves you would never allow that unless he felt something good could come from it. Just like a father never disciplines his child unless he believes it will benefit his child. And that's what the Bible says, don't despise the chastening of the Lord.

Whom he loves he chases. And he scourges those that he receives, his children. This is an act of love and children don't understand it.

Children don't look forward to it. The writer of Hebrews says no chastening seems pleasant at the time but grievous. Yet afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who are exercised by it.

And so there is in fact the biblical teaching that God does chasten. God does allow disaster. God does bring trials into our lives to test us and to strengthen us.

When Paul prayed three times that his trial would go away, the Lord said to him, my grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in your weakness. And Paul then said, then I'll rejoice in my infirmities.

I'll rejoice in my weakness. I'll rejoice in those things. That he was at one time praying would go away.

Not anymore. You can learn to embrace things if you know that God has a plan for you in him. We know that Romans 8.28 says all things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose.

So everything, God works together for good, even the bad things. God could stop them because the angel of the Lord encamps around about them that fear him and delivers them. That's in Psalm 34.

The angels can stop things if God wants them to, but if God lets the disaster come

through, that line of defense, he's got a good idea in mind. He did for Job. He did for Jesus.

He did for Paul. He does for you. He did for Naomi.

Naomi didn't know that part. She knew God was in it, but she didn't know that God was good in it. He's been harsh to me.

He's afflicted me. He's testified against me. God is against me.

That's not faith speaking. A Christian can say, I don't know why God's doing this, but I know he loves me. I know he's not against me.

I know he's on my side. I know he works all things together for good to those who love him and who are called according to his purpose. Therefore, as it says in the Psalms, Psalm 119, it is good for me that I've been afflicted, that I might learn your ways.

Same psalmist said in the same psalm, I know, oh Lord, that you are just and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. Now that's faith talking. You, God, have afflicted me because you're faithful to me.

It's not because you're against me. It's because I needed it. And so, Naomi's seen part of the truth, but not the whole truth.

She sees God is in it, but she doesn't see that it's necessarily something he's going to work together for good. She just wants to be bitter from now on. So Naomi returned and Ruth, the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab.

Now, they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. That'd be mid-April. The barley harvest would be followed immediately by the wheat harvest, which would go on until mid-June.

So mid-April to mid-May, then to June, you've got about two months of harvest. And those are the times when not only the harvesters, but also the gleaners would—that'd be the part of the year that they'd gather up their food for the whole year. So this is the time to be coming to the house of bread, Bethlehem, at harvest time, at a time when God has visited his people and given them bread, as it says.

So there's a potential of making enough income here in terms of collecting to last the whole year. So it's a fortuitous time to be coming. And in chapter 2, it says, There was a relative of Naomi's husband, that is, of Elimelech, a man of great wealth, of a family of Elimelech.

His name was Boaz. So Ruth, the Moabitess, said to Naomi, Please let me go to the field and glean heads of grain after him in whose sight I may find favor. Now, she didn't have

Boaz in mind.

She didn't even know who Boaz was. She said, Let me find somebody who'll let me glean in his field behind his reapers, because we need some food. She said, Go, my daughter.

Then she left and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers. And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Now, she didn't know that.

It just happened this way. It was a coincidence. But it wasn't a coincidence.

And this is what I'm saying about both Ruth and Esther. Tell us a series of things that we would regard as coincidences if it didn't turn out that they all had to happen that way in order for God's purpose to be fulfilled. The fact that these things were essential parts of God's purpose being fulfilled shows that he wouldn't have allowed them not to take place.

These were the providence of God. They were not coincidences, though it's spoken as if she just happened to come to that field. Now, if she had come to a different field, she might have reaped there the whole season.

She might never have met Boaz. But Boaz is very important because he's a relative. Now, again, what's going to be important here is that the Jews had a law of levirate marriage, but not only levirate marriage, but of the goel.

The Hebrew word goel, G-O-E-L, means a close relative who has the right to redeem. Under the law of Moses, there were several things a close relative could do if you had disasters in life. One, if you were sold into slavery, he could buy you out of slavery.

Another is if you had to forfeit your property because of your poverty, he could buy it back for you. And the purchaser who bought it from you or who had taken it from you would have to sell it back to him because he had the right to buy it back for you. Even if the person who had the property as a second owner didn't want to part with it, they had to.

The goel could buy it back for you. And also, the goel would be the one who would marry the widow of a man who had no children. And so these were the goel duties under the law.

And goel is a close relative, the closest. Usually, it was a man's brother, the deceased man's brother. But he might not have any brothers.

If he had no brothers, then it would be his uncle. If he had no uncles, it would be his cousin. There was a whole hierarchy of relations in the Jewish law as to who was the goel.

Now, we don't know what the exact relation of Boaz was to Elimelech, but he was a close relative. Therefore, he was...it doesn't say he was a brother, so he was probably an uncle or a cousin to Elimelech. And it turns out there's going to be another guy who's even a closer relative than Boaz.

But Ruth is totally unaware of this. And so she goes and she gleans in the field. Now, I'm not going to go over this in the detail I've been doing because we're running out of time.

I need to take a break here in a moment and let you stretch. But I want to just say that in this chapter, then, Boaz notices her. And he just treats her kindly.

You might wonder if he's flirting, but it doesn't say he's flirting. He's just being very generous, very kind. He tells his workers to let her glean ahead of the other poor people so she'd get the first chance at getting anything that was dropped by the reapers.

And then he even told the reapers to drop some grain on purpose. In other words, don't just leave gleanings as you normally would, but some of that you've already harvested, throw it on the ground in front of her so she can gather it up. Now, you might say, why doesn't he just hand her stuff? Well, eventually he does.

But he didn't want to kind of interfere with her dignity to earn her living. Even poor people who have the ability to support themselves prefer to support themselves than to receive charity in most cases. I'm not sure American poor people are that way as much now, but that was the case in times where people had character and where people really felt that they shouldn't be a burden on other people.

They want to work. Work was dignified. Even Boaz, a very rich man who had servants working in his fields, he worked.

He was out with the reapers reaping too. He slept among them. It's not like the fat cat executive who sits up in his air-conditioned office while the grunts under him do all the hard work.

In those days, work was considered to be an honorable thing. Even the man who had servants was out there working in the field with his servants. That's how Boaz was.

So he let Ruth work, but he kind of gave her some advantages. He just wanted to be nice to her. Now, partly this is because when he first saw her, he said, whose maiden is this? Now, I'm not sure why he asked that initially because he didn't know who she was.

It might just be because in a small town, it's unusual to see a woman that you've never seen before. So, well, who's that? It might also be because he found her attractive. We're not ever told whether Ruth was physically attractive or not, but there's some hints that she was.

For example, Boaz had to tell his men not to touch her. Also, later on, it says that when she was wanting to marry him, he said, you're virtuous because you didn't choose a young rich man instead of an old rich man. Now, a woman doesn't just have the choice of a man she wants to necessarily, unless she does.

And most of us know what usually is the factor that makes a woman capable of having any young rich man she wants. It's usually her looks. I'm not saying she doesn't have anything else going for her, but that's the first thing men notice, and even a woman who doesn't have much character will often be chosen if she has good looks.

I'm not saying that's the way it should be. That's just the way life is. And so there's some hints that she might have been a very good-looking woman.

It's interesting because Rachel and Rebecca and Sarah are all specifically said to be beautiful women. And Esther was said to be a beautiful woman. We're not told that Ruth is a beautiful woman, but you kind of get the impression that that's probably true.

So Boaz sees her. He asks who she is. Now, he's told that she is the daughter-in-law of Naomi, whom he knows because Aline was a close relative of his.

So, you know, it's like Naomi is the widow of his close relative. And he hears the story about how Ruth, instead of taking the easy way, has come to help support her mother-in-law at great sacrifice to herself. And so he's impressed with her virtue, and he wants to reward her.

And so he gives her chances to take home a lot of grain, more than most of the women got. And when she comes home at the end of chapter 2, and Naomi sees all that grain, she realizes this is not normal. Gleaners don't usually get that much.

It's like 30 or 40 pounds she brings home in her apron. Must be a strong woman. But Naomi says, where were you gleaned? She says, with this guy named Boaz.

And Naomi says, oh. The light goes on, and the scheming mother-in-law comes up with a scheme. It's not a bad one, but it's a scheme that apparently Ruth didn't think of.

And so when you come to chapter 3, you have the romantic interest between Ruth and Boaz. And this is at the end of the harvest season. Ruth has been collecting grain the whole time, and now it's at the end, and they're threshing the grain.

Which is, they take it to the threshing floor, and they beat it, and they separate the kernels of grain from the chaff. And then they winnow it by throwing the whole lot in the air and letting the wind blow away the chaff, because it's light and feathery, hairy stuff, and the grain falls, and this is how they get rid of the chaff and the grain in those days. And we're at that point in the season, mid-June now.

And Naomi says, listen. This man could marry you. He's our Goel.

He's one of our Goelim. That's plural for Goel. And therefore, go to him in the night, and while he's asleep, just uncover his feet and lay down by his feet.

I guess his feet would get cold and wake him up, and he'd realize someone's there, and that happened. And Ruth was coached by her mother-in-law to say, she said, listen, you're a Goel of ours. Redeem me.

Spread the edge of your garment over me, which was a Middle Eastern way of saying, be my protector, become my husband. And you might think it's strange for a wife, a woman, to propose, even today, and much more so in ancient Middle Eastern times. But the law of the Goelim actually said that if a man didn't marry his brother's widow when she was childless, that she should take him to court.

She should take the initiative. Now, there's a reason Boaz has not moved yet. It's not that he's not interested, because as soon as Ruth mentions it, he's into it.

But the reason he hasn't done anything yet is because he's not the nearest Goel. Someone really has the right to redeem her before he has the right to. It's a right and a duty.

And so he said, I'd love to do that. I'd love to marry you, but there's this other guy who's a closer relative to a Goelim, like then even I am, and he has right of first refusal, really. And so I'll go talk to him in the morning and see what he says.

And so in chapter 4, Boaz does approach this man and says, you know, Naomi, the widow of our brother Elimelech, she's selling a piece of property that belonged to our brother. Apparently, Elimelech had some property, and Naomi's finances were so endangered that she had to sell off family property. That would only happen in times of poverty.

So she was still not doing well financially, even though they're getting a lot of grain. You know, you can eat a lot of grain, but that still doesn't buy a house for you or buy clothes for you or do those kinds of things, pay the electric bill. And so she had to sell off some property.

And that's just the kind of thing that a Goel could come to the rescue about. He could buy it back for her. And so Boaz says to this other guy who's closer than he is in relation, you know, Naomi had to sell this property.

You can buy it. And the man said, OK, I'll buy it. But then Boaz says, but the one who does that also has to marry the widow of Maolan, Ruth, the Moabites.

And the guy who's first in line for this says, oh, well, I can't do that. I'm afraid I'll mar my

inheritance. Now, marrying his inheritance is not at all a self-explanatory term.

It's not clear what he means, but it probably means that he already had a wife and children who he didn't want another wife and children to be contesting his inheritance when he's gone. It's complex enough if you have children of your own from one wife, you want to have another half family over here that are fighting over yourself. I don't that's too much trouble.

That's probably what he meant. Some people think he meant he didn't want to marry a Moabite. He thought Maulan died when he did that.

I don't think I want to follow his example. But he didn't want his inheritance to be damaged. So he said no.

And then Boaz agreed to do it. Now, it's kind of interesting because they had a transactional way of doing this. They contracted all this at the gate of the city where the elders were.

There were 10 witnesses gathered. And the man who was turning down the offer had to take his sandal off and hand it to Boaz. Now, the sandal represented inheritance rights.

Because inheritance rights usually had to do with land. And in the Old Testament, where you set your foot is where your property is. So where your sandal has trodden is your inheritance land.

At least it was for Abraham. And so giving the sandals, I'm symbolically giving you my inheritance. I'm putting you in the position I would be in.

You can redeem the property and marry Ruth. And so Boaz did. And there was a wedding and a baby born.

And everyone rejoiced and the story comes to an end. Like I said, there's no adventure in the story. Unless you can relate with a widow in those kind of dire straits.

I guess that would be pretty tense. But it's mainly a romance. And interestingly, the first part is more like a romance between Ruth and her mother-in-law.

Her love for her mother-in-law is what's so striking at the beginning. But then, of course, Boaz, who's always everywhere in the story represented as a godly man, he falls in love with her too. So if you like a little short romance, the story's going to appeal to you.

And some people do. Some people would rather have the battle scenes and the miracles and the Red Sea closing over the Egyptians and stuff. But this is a book that has a story that's important to know.

And that is that God was involved in this situation with this lowly Gentile woman who

gave up everything in order to become part of Yahweh's religion and people. And then God honored her to become the ancestress of King David and of all the royal family after David and of the Messiah eventually. Now, we're going to take a break here.

And I've got only a little bit more I want to cover, but I want to cover something more. So we'll take about a five-minute break or so or ten.