

Ordinary Lives

Series on the book of Ruth

By Dr. Liam Goligher

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Ruth 2

Preached on: Sunday, July 28, 2013

Tenth Presbyterian Church

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

Do take your Bibles and turn with me to Ruth 2. You'll also find it printed in the bulletin, though you may want to have your Bible open so we can do a bit of wandering around the book of Ruth as we're looking at this this evening.

I wonder if you believe in the divinity and humanity of the Bible? I wonder whether you think that's even a good question to ask? The divinity and the humanity of the Bible. Think about it, for example, about the authorship of the Bible. We know that Scripture tells us that it was breathed out by God. Ultimately he is the author. He is the one who breathed out the content of the revelation. He is the author and yet we can also say about the Bible that there are human beings who were the authors. The Apostle Peter, writing about this, says this, he says holy men of God wrote as they were carried along as a person is carried along with the flow of a stream or a river, carried along by the Holy Spirit. As they are carried along by the Spirit, so they write, but they are doing the writing.

You two are late, by the way. I don't want to embarrass you or anything but you are late and you just came at the wrong moment because I was in a freewheeling moment and I couldn't think of anything humorous to say but now you are it. I'll apologize to them later. There's a reason why...never mind, I'll tell you, I won't tell you, actually, but I'll deal with them in a moment. They've got homework to do as a result. I forget completely what I was saying there.

We're talking about the authorship of the Bible before I was so rudely interrupted and I was saying that the people who wrote it, wrote it themselves. You can see the personality of John, for example, when he writes his Gospel. You can see the personality of someone like Paul or Isaiah the prophet. Their personality comes through in what they write and yet we're told, nonetheless, these holy men of God are writing as they are carried along by the Spirit. The Bible is both divine and human.

You think about its content. The Bible does teach theology, doesn't it? It teaches about God. It speaks about God more than anything else. It tells us that without the Bible we wouldn't know anything about God. God has given us the Bible so that we understand him. He hasn't given us a textbook on other aspects of life because you can find out about

those things without needing God to tell you because he has given us other human beings to think about literature and think about what exercises you need if you want to lose weight or whatever your personal trainer, you know, that kind of skill, that didn't need God to give a revelation to somebody about that. Those kinds of things we can find out for ourselves but God has given us the Bible to tell us about him.

But also it gives an insight into our own hearts. The Bible accurately demonstrates that there is no area of human life that is off limits to God, about which God is not interested. He's interested in the micro-interests of people. We see that in the book of Ruth, I think very clearly. God is interested in the micro-interests of these people who are living real lives at a time of difficulty in the history of the world. But at the same time, God is dealing with their micro-interests in pursuit of a macro-interest: the kingdom of God that is at work here in the story.

And you can think about the humanity and the divinity of the Bible not only in terms of its authorship and its content, but also its goal. What is the goal of the Bible? The goal of the Bible is going to lead us to one individual who is 100% God and 100% man; who is absolutely divine and absolutely human. Two natures in one person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, we need to keep these principles, I think, in our minds and when we're reading the book of Ruth, I think we see these principles very clearly. I've been underlining this, we've been studying this, the bigger picture, the key role that Ruth is taking, is going to take place in the drama of redemption. Ruth is going to be mentioned not only here in the Hebrew Bible as the grandmother of King David, the great king of Israel, King David, but she is also going to appear in the genealogy of the King of kings, of Jesus Christ himself. This Ruth has a key role to play in the drama of redemption but when you look into the story, Ruth is totally unaware of that bigger act that she's playing. She's totally unaware of it. She's just living her life from day to day, realizing how desperate her circumstances and the circumstances of her mother-in-law are, coping with the grief of losing her husband, seeing her family dissolve, leaving her home, leaving her family and her past and her religion, everything else, coming to this new land, pursuing a relationship with this new God far away from her home. She's unaware of the big picture. All she knows is the microcosm of her insignificant life. That's how people would have seen it, just one other foreigner who happens to be living in Judah. How important could this person be? That would be the attitude of the world.

Well now, we come halfway through the story and we're in a position to stop for a moment and take stock because this author, the author of Ruth, is one of the best storytellers if not the best storyteller in the Bible and he's writing a love story. We need to understand that. This is a romance. He's writing this story from a feminine point of view. We see this in the selection of his material. We see it in his understanding of the female psychology. The person who writes this is writing it from the standpoint of understanding romantic love, courtship, friendship, feminine experience, nature, farming practice, family loyalty and the struggle for survival.

I think any woman reading the book of Ruth will identify with much of what's going on in the story easily but you say to me, "But you're a man." Not me, you're saying, "But you're a man." And you're saying, "Oh, you know, I don't like this feminization stuff. Why would I bother with studying the book of Ruth?" Well, I think you would bother with studying the book of Ruth for the same reason that I advise you to go to a chick flick from time to time. You need to go to these things because that's the kind of thing that your girlfriend or your wife or your mother watches and one of the reasons they watch it is that from time to time, they're not all like this, by the way, some of them are really not good, but many of them are highlighting aspects of...women, don't kill me afterwards for saying this, okay? Have mercy on me. I'm trying to get through to these men just for a second so you ignore me and let me talk to them. These movies, what they do is they highlight aspects of female character and feminine nature, something you don't understand. Something you need to really work hard to understand because you've got a mother and you may have a girlfriend and you may one day have a wife and you may one day have daughters and you really need to understand the way their mind works so that you can care for them and cherish them and encourage them to grow and not be a big, fat pain in the whatever. Okay? Have you got that? That's your daddy talking to you now, right? So let's move back to the story. It's important that we read the book of Ruth because it helps men understand what's going on in the lives of the other side of the struggle.

Well, chapter 1 of the book we saw describes a downward spiral of loss. Naomi loses first her husband and then her two boys. Ruth and Orpah lose their husbands. And against that background, we begin to see the emerging character of this one daughter-in-law, Ruth. We see her loyalty to her mother-in-law. We see her commitment to the God of Israel which leads her to reject her pagan background.

Chapter 2, on the other hand, overflows with a sense of hope. It is bracketed at the end of chapter 1, verse 22, which is really the beginning of chapter 2, let's forget about the chapters, they've been added later. But the whole section begins with chapter 1, verse 22. It was the beginning of the barley harvest and then in chapter 2, verse 23, this is the bracket that frames this whole story, it was the end of the barley harvest. So it's the beginning and the end. This is a finite period of time. This is a summer romance. Have you ever had one of those summer romances? You've been away on vacation, some camp or other, and you meet someone and you know perfectly well it's going to end. There is a point where everybody is going to go home and they're going to go home to different parts of the country. If you're going to get anywhere, you've got to get somewhere quickly. You've got to get that relationship established. You've got to hit the ground running. You can't afford time. And what we're being told here is that all of this is happening in a finite period of time. If anything is going to happen in this story, it has to happen between the beginning of the barley harvest and the end of the barley harvest. That's what we're being told. There is something happening and it's going to happen here and what is being described here is how a developing relationship occurs in that finite period of time. It's very important to see that that's what's going on. You may understand how those relationships develop. Maybe you have memories of a relationship like that

and it's gone. It's gone in the past and it's only a memory. Perhaps it's a sad memory but you'll have some understanding of what's going on here.

Well, up to this point, what I want to do today is to reprise what we've learned and what we need to learn from the three main characters in the story. First of all, there is Ruth. Ruth is a God-dependent woman under the wings of God. That's how she's going to be described. Let me read to you what Boaz, the significant other in this story, says about her. "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before." In other words, what he does is he kind of crystallizes what we've been learning about this girl. Here's a girl who's had some really hard stuff thrown at her in her life: hard providences, circumstances. And what Boaz recognizes about this girl is that she doesn't just throw in the towel of faith; she hasn't abandoned her faith, rather she has listened carefully to the law of God and to the word of God. It was Ruth, remember, who came up with the idea of going out to where they were harvesting the barley and following the harvesters and gathering the bits and pieces that hadn't been collected. She came up with that idea and she didn't come up with that idea out of the blue. She came up with that idea because she had been listening to the reading of the law of God in the synagogue or whatever it was. She had been listening to the law of God being read and as she listened to the law of God being read she believed the word of God. When God made provision for the poor and for the foreigner, she thought to herself, "I'm poor and I'm a foreigner and here's God's law. God's law is that his people, the Jews, the Israelites, when they are harvesting their crops should consider people like me, poor and the stranger, and should not go to the very edges of their field but leave some so that the poor and the stranger can gather some stuff and make bread for themselves." She came up with that idea because she had listened to the word of God. She recognized the word of God there and she did something about it.

She emerges as a hard worker. She labors all day. When we come to the reading we had today, she has labored all day with very few breaks presumably. The foreman who is in charge notices. The foreman always notices, by the way, and he records it and he's able to report it to Boaz. Here is a woman who had to work for her living; a woman who had to be out there slaving in order to survive. Any woman here who has to work out there in the world and every day has to get up and face the expenditure of effort and energy in having to work for your own living will recognize and identify with Ruth. She is working to survive here and she's working hard. Not only that, we learn from her that she is humble and she is grateful for any kindness that is shown to her along the way.

So Ruth is a God-dependent woman under the wings of God. Secondly, Boaz is a God-saturated man under the influence of God. If you look at chapter 2, verse 1, we are told something about Boaz. Very early on we're told that he was a worthy man. "Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz." We're told that and then it goes back to the story. It's almost like that stands there alone in isolation. We're not told at that point why we're being told this bit of information. It's just thrown out there but it heightens our imagination and our expectation. Could it be, could

it be that this someone, this worthy man is someone who could do something for these destitute women?

We're not surprised to find him, as the story unfolds, living up to that reputation. He is a worthy man. We find him honoring God in his business relationships, in his personal interaction with those who are his employees. We saw that in verse 4 and verses 10 to 13. We find that his faith in God translates into good relationships with his workforce. He is not one of these walk all over his workforce kind of characters. You see it in the way in which he treats them, with dignity. He greets them in a formal way but with language that indicates that he is used to greeting them this way in confidence and with faith in God and with genuineness. He's a man who is caring and generous. He has taught his workforce to leave the edges of the fields. I don't think that was happening very much in Israel at this time. These are the days of the Judges, remember. This is a period that is not a good period in the life of Israel. They are not normally attentive to the law of God or to the word of God but here's a man whose workforce is attentive to the word of God because he, as the boss, has decreed that they should consider the poor and the stranger and leave the edges of the field so that they can collect some food for themselves. Here is a man who has learned that the law of God and love for people are not two opposites; that the law of God is, in fact, a law of love. It's intended for our good. He believes that.

He practices that and so we find him giving permission for Ruth to glean in his field, the generous love that he shows towards her and it's this generosity that he shows that actually gets Ruth's attention. I think he's an older man, by the way. I think he's older, how much older we don't know but I think it's his generosity that appeals to Ruth, not just because she benefits from it but I think that is already reaching her heart and I think she loved him for his kindness and his generosity and gentleness. We're told this at one point, "Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, 'Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?'" She recognized that she was an outsider. She was a quintessential outsider. She was a Moabite. The Moabites and the Israelites didn't get on. The Moabites hated the Israelites. The Israelites hated them in turn. She was an outsider. This man was a pillar of the community. Boaz was your quintessential insider and yet he makes her welcome and he brings her in and she understands the implications of this. She said to him, "I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants." "I'm not one of your employees. You've no obligation to me. I have nothing really that I can expect from you and yet you have shown me kindness. You have spoken kindly to me. You have reached out to me although you have no obligation to do so." That impressed her. You can see that has impressed her. He has made an impression on her heart.

So let me tell you, guys: I know women can like handsome hunks but most of them will discover that the handsome hunk isn't necessarily somebody you want to spend your life with. What will attract, especially a godly woman, is character, gentleness, and understanding, and a sympathetic ear. Somebody who is really interested and not just interested in the main chance but interested in them as people. Boaz is interested. I think he's interested in Ruth. He has noticed her, we've already observed that, but he makes it

quite clear that if it was merely she was good-looking and got his attention, "Who is this girl," that's okay. That's okay. It really is okay but he builds it on something else. That got his attention. He asks around and he hears what kind of person she is and it's what kind of person she is that captures his heart in the end which tells you a lot about Boaz, that he doesn't see the attractive girl and stop there. He wants to know more. He wants to know more of who she is. He wants to know what kind of person she is.

Well, the outsider then is welcomed. We also notice something else about Boaz here: his discernment. Look at chapter 2, verse 12, "The LORD repay you for what you have done," he's talking to her, "and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" Here's a man, you see, he sees what she has done. He sees what's been going on in her life and he recognizes that actually what is really significant about this girl is her faith in God, her trust in God. She has come from Moab to Israel. She has come from the idols of Moab to the God of Israel. She has left everything she knows and she has come here. Why? Ultimately this is the reason she came: she came to find safety under the wings of God. That's the kind of euphemism, an expression, a metaphor that describes someone who has come to trust in God; who has come to put all the eggs in the basket of God, as it were. To commit themselves entirely to the God of Israel, the Lord Yahweh. He sees that that's at the heart of what she's doing. Boaz is an outstanding man. He has that discernment to see through to the heart of the issue.

Sinclair Ferguson in one of his books quotes John Milton, a great English poet, words about Oliver Cromwell who was for a while the ruler of Britain, or at least of England. And Milton writes this about Cromwell, "He was a soldier disciplined to perfection in the knowledge of himself. He had either extinguished or by habit had learned to subdue the whole host of vain hopes, fears and passions which invest the soul. He first acquired the government of himself and over himself acquired the most signal victories so that on the first day that he took to the field against the external enemy, he was a veteran at arms, consummately practiced in the toils and the exigencies of war." Oliver Cromwell is an outstanding man because he was able, in a sense, to fight an external enemy because he had fought all the enemies within himself and had triumphed and Boaz appears like that in the story.

The third character is Naomi. Naomi is a God-exalting woman under the sovereignty of God. Chapter 2 paints an amazing picture of her reversal of fortune. Chapter 1, everything is lost. Naomi comes back to Bethlehem and she says, "I have come back empty. When we left we had stuff. When I left I had a husband and then I had children and then I had daughters-in-law and I had the potential of a family and now I have come back and I have nothing. My husband is gone. My boys are gone. Our wealth is gone. I have come back empty."

Then at this passage that we just read tonight, did you notice this passage we just read this evening suddenly there is this mound of food. Ruth has been out all day, she comes back and she has this amazing amount of food to eat that could keep them going for weeks and weeks and weeks and all the darkness of chapter 1 disappears. God turns her

mourning into dancing. In chapter 1, verse 20, "the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." In chapter 2, verse 20, "His kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Do you see the difference? It's on that word "kindness," the Hebrew word "chesed." This word I have said over and over again is the word that governs the story. Absolutely everything is connected to this word that appears in the beginning, in the middle and the end of this book. Chesed, the kindness of God.

And here she refers to it, "His kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Is she referring to Boaz showing kindness? She hasn't met Boaz yet. She doesn't know Boaz as an individual. I think she's thinking about God or she's thinking about the kindness of the Lord through Boaz. But what she is saying is this, suddenly she has realized that God is not out to get her. God is not after her. That God loves her in spite of her history of rebellion and disobedience. She has learned the truth of Deuteronomy 10, "The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner," the stranger, the foreigner, "giving him food and clothing." And he says to his people, "You love the sojourner therefore for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." She says, "This is the kindness of God, the chesed of God that describes not only God's ways with us but our ways with one another. It describes every act of loyalty, every generous action." Ruth's loyalty to and care for her mother-in-law is described in these terms. Boaz's acts of generosity are described in these terms. Naomi sees chesed being manifest in the daily workplace where Boaz and Ruth meet. This care for the poor, of course, and the sojourner, the stranger, is one which the church has enshrined in its diaconate. One of the reasons for diaconal ministry is the care of the poor, the care of the needy within the congregation because if we can't care for our own, then there is something fundamentally wrong. It's not the state's place to look after our own. We look after our own ourselves. "If anyone does not provide for his relatives and especially for members of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

Listen to Naomi's testimony for a moment. In her testimony, she sees the kindness of God in the details of life. When Ruth returned from her first day of gleaning, she had a lot to talk about. Lots to share. Let's go back for a moment and pick up the story. Boaz instructed his young men saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves and don't reproach her and also pull out some from the bundles for her." In other words, "As you're packing it all up, pull some out and drop them. Just drop them off the cart as you're moving along. Pull some out. Remember she's behind you there so make sure she has something to pick up as she's trotting along behind you gathering this stuff. Think about her," he says. As you can see, he's already looking out for her. That's what you want, girls. Somebody who will look out for you. Who will care for you. Who will nourish and cherish you and that's what he's beginning to do even now. He's starting there.

Let me tell you, you want to see what they're like at the very beginning. They're not going to get any better. Seriously. That's why we have engagements. Engagements are a breathing space for you to keep an eye on him to see whether in fact what he was doing in the first few weeks when he was taking you out and being all nice and smarmy and

generous and kind is actually real and lasting or whether that was just for then. And during a period of engagement, let me tell you, if it turns out to be not like that, get rid of him. Don't even go any further because he's not going to get any better, he'll get worse. That works the other way as well, of course, but that's just some fatherly advice while we are here.

So here we have a picture of Ruth. She's doing this, she's following behind. He's looking out for her and she's gleaning in the field. She gleaned in the field until evening, we're told, and then she beats out what she had gleaned and what she beat out, in other words the actual grain that she had that she could bake with was an ephah of barley. That is between 30 and 50 pounds of grain. 22 liters. 3/5 of a bushel. That is a heavy load. That is a big sack of potatoes for her to carry and she carries this home. She has been going to a personal trainer. She is a muscular lady and she carries this home to Naomi. I find this hard to imagine, just imagine this: what struck her was the sheer amount of food and grain that Ruth brought home. Look at verses 18 and 19, "Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also," that is Ruth also brought out the remainders of a picnic because halfway through the day she had a picnic and Boaz has sat beside her and Boaz had shared his picnic with her and she had eaten what she could and she had kept the rest and she brought it home now and she brings this out, what was left of the picnic, and gives it to her mother-in-law and her mother-in-law ate it and was satisfied, verse 18. Then her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? Where have you worked?" She is struck by this. It's overwhelming. Somebody has shown extraordinary kindness to her daughter-in-law. "Blessed be the man," she says, "who took notice of you." She sees the hand of God at work, you see, in the details of life. He's at work in the provision of food, in the friendship and generosity shown by somebody somewhere to this stranger.

The book of Ruth teaches us, you see, to value the things that God values: daily food, romantic love, loyal friendship, family life, generous gifts, hard work, virtuous living, the natural world, every day life. Value the things that God values. You say, "I like romantic love but don't have it." Do you have loyal friendships? Do you have a satisfying career? Do you enjoy the natural world? In a fallen world, nothing is perfect. Even the best relationships are imperfect. There is always something that keeps you from enjoying even the most perfect relationship to its fullest advantage. In life, we have to cope with those things but there are often other things in life that we don't recognize that are actually good as well: good food, good music, good movies, good people. And they are there to help us.

She sees the kindness of God in the details of life. She sees the kindness of God in the surprises of life. Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? Where have you worked? Blessed is he who took notice of you but what is the name of this man who took notice of you?" And Ruth replies, "His name is Boaz," and a light goes on. We have already had it signaled, you see, back in chapter 2, verse 1, this random verse, this worthy man Boaz who was a relative. We know that. Ruth doesn't know that. Ruth has just told Naomi the name, Boaz. Naomi knows what we know, chapter 2, verse 1, that Boaz is a worthy man and that he is qualified. Ah-ha, the plot thickens. Naomi is now beginning to

catch on. She is thrilled that the Lord's kindness has not forsaken the living, Naomi and Ruth, or the dead, Elimelech and Chilion, the brothers. It was the Lord who had sent the famine. It was the Lord who had stopped the famine. It was the Lord who had bound Ruth to Naomi in love. It was the Lord who preserved Boaz for Ruth and Ruth did not just happen to come upon that field that belonged to Boaz. The Lord was kind. He was good to all who take refuge under his wings. And what Naomi says is this, "This man is qualified if he so chooses. He is qualified to really help us out here." Not just because he was wealthy and had fields but for another reason, he was a kinsman redeemer.

Now here, just for a moment, time, they just don't give me long enough here, this job. I don't really have time for this so I'm going to stop right here. We're going to come across, we're going to move into this question next time about what the kinsman redeemer is. It's a foreign idea but we live in a multicultural world, we should be able to handle it. We should be able to handle foreign ideas because we every day have to deal with the different cultures of the world that are coming to live here. So we're going to do that next time. We're going to pick up and see what this phrase "a kinsman redeemer" means. But let me just summarize it like this: here is someone who is in a position not just to provide daily meals, here's somebody who's in a position to make such a difference to the life of Naomi and Ruth that will put Ruth in the position, the place, wherein the purpose of God, the Redeemer can come. It will also put Ruth in a position where her earthly joys are secured in her relationship that has been manufactured and engineered by God specifically for her. Specifically for her.

As I wind up this evening, the lesson I think I want us to walk away with is this: we need to see, we need to have the eyes to see the Lord's kindness in the details and in the surprises of our lives. We bump into people, we get to know folks just randomly and we think, "Why? Why has this happened?" And often in the purpose of God, that is precisely what we needed that will make a difference for time and for eternity. Maybe you just came randomly to church this evening and you're wondering what on earth I've been rambling on about. Don't ask anyone before you leave because they won't be able to answer the question either. I hope you have seen that this story is a story written by God and it's a story which takes the ordinary and the mundane elements of a human life and breathes into them the breath of God so that there is nothing small, nothing insignificant, nothing mundane about you, about your life when that life is connected to the God who made you and the God who has acted to be your Redeemer, your Savior. Nothing that cannot be transformed by that relationship, by this God.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you that in the midst of all of the challenges of our lives that you are so pleased to draw near to us by your word and Spirit. And my prayer is this evening that we would find in the Lord Jesus our great champion and that in finding him, satisfy a whole dimension of our life that cannot be satisfied in any other human relationship. But we thank you that in asking that question, it's not in any way to undermine or undervalue the way in which you choose to work in our lives through other people, sending them into our experience to be a friend or more than a friend. We thank you for that goodness and

we pray that you would please use such people in our lives for your glory. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.