

Fellow Heirs Of The Life -- Part I

by Steve Zeisler

Today and next Sunday we will consider together the lives of Ruth and Boaz, a man and woman who loved each other. Before we turn to these events of 3,000 years ago, however, just to remind you of how different our world is now, let me read something I clipped from the Palo Alto Times within the last year:

"John R. Doe, Jr. wants to begin life again at 50 with a new wife who will bear him six children. He has placed a display advertisement in the Palo Alto Times scheduled to begin running next week listing his qualifications. Doe's requirements for the ideal wife are: age, between 22 and 35, slim athletic body, able to play tennis, golf, jog and dance, a Christian who loves children, a non-- smoker and nondrinker, a person vitally into good nutrition. Doe will include his telephone number in the advertisement so that wife candidates can phone him, noting that, 'we can talk it over and they will know what I am searching for.' Likely choices will be invited for a personal interview at his home. Doe declared that the woman's 'sweetness' will be the determining factor in whether he selects her, although, of course, she must meet the other criteria."

This love story from the Book of Ruth makes a lot more sense than what I just read.

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. And they took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

The events which take place in the opening verses of this book cover some 10 years and they are gone over quickly by our author. We can pull out some important background information, however, which will help us understand the people we will be learning from. The opening phrase tells us that it was during the time when the judges governed that these events took place. One author has described the judges' period as characterized by "savagery, lust, strife, and lawlessness." It was one of the longest and darkest tunnels in Israel's history, when there was very little knowledge of or love for God.

Second we are told it was a period of famine. Through news reports we are, perhaps, more acquainted with famine in this day than any time in the 20th century. I remember a scene from the movie, "The Grapes of Wrath," where a hurting family whose crops had failed moved to California in a desperate attempt to find a place to settle down and earn a living. Those are the conditions we have here. Elimelech and his family migrate from a place where crops would not grow to a foreign land in an effort to feed themselves.

So we have the problem of a clash between cultures and nationalities. Again, we are familiar with that in our day. We read a lot today about the problem of illegal aliens in this country. There are hot tempers and angry exchanges between people from different nations, different cultures, who are trying to get along with one another.

Ruth was a Moabitess, while the family of Elimelech were Jews. Moab, in fact, was not only a different country than Israel, but a nation who had been military enemies of Israel for much of their history. Their religious system was the exact opposite of the worship of Jehovah. Chemosh was the god of the Moabites, the demon god who was worshipped by burning children in his honor. It was a dark, violent, insecure,

destructive religious system, the exact opposite of the light and glory that God wanted to display in his people Israel, although at this time their life style was far from it. So we have this cultural problem as a background to our story .

Then there was the problem of widowhood, which is a very difficult thing in any age, but having the emotional support of a marriage relationship taken away was particularly hard in biblical times. There was no Social Security; there was no life insurance. Widows in the Old Testament were the classic example of destitute people. And love for widows, therefore, was the primary example of what it meant to be servant-hearted toward others, because their condition was so desperate. These are the times and the conditions in which this account takes place.

There is also a human background that we ought to identify. We can do that by learning further about the woman Naomi, because her personality has a lot to do with the kind of interaction Ruth and Boaz are allowed to have. It is against the background of Naomi's personality that their faith in God is exemplified. Verse 6,

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the Lord had visited His people in giving them food. So she departed from the place where she was, and her daughters- in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And Naomi said to her two daughters-- in-- law, "Co, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May the Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, " No but we will surely return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb' that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Co, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope. if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me.. And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-- in-- law, but Ruth clung to her So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came about when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was stirred because of them.and the women said, "Is this Naomi ?" And she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi ; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the Lord has brought me teach empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me,"

Naomi was a realist. She had been hurt by life; she had suffered a great deal. She was a widow who had learned by suffering not to trust anything that could not be dealt with by her five senses. She did not allow her emotions to get in the way of cold, hard facts, and she made decisions on that basis. I am convinced she would have been a great businesswoman. When Orpah and Ruth call out to her emotionally, "We love each other. Let's try and make it together as a threesome," Naomi cuts them off. "Don't be ridiculous. We have to look at this thing coldbloodedly now. If you go back to your parent's home the chances are much greater that you will get a husband than if you go with me. Whatever feelings we have between us need to be swept aside in order to take the intelligent, the rational approach."

Naomi was an angry woman. She even describes herself that way. Her name means "pleasant," but when she returned to Bethlehem, her home town, she insisted that people begin to call her Mara, which is the Hebrew word for "bitter." "My name should be bitter, not pleasant. I've been dealt with bitterly," she said. She was a manipulative woman, as we will see, and it is this angry, unresolved resentment that fueled her manipulation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Naomi blamed God for what had happened to her. She says so repeatedly. Verse 13, "it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me"; in verse 21, "Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?" "It is Cod's fault. He has done this to me, so I have a right to be resentful toward him."

Naomi, in one respect, is like a lot of people in churches today. She is not an evil woman, she is not wicked,

but she is faithless. She has stopped believing that God could do anything that she could not measure and account for ahead of time. She had been hurt so badly that she refused to trust God to do anything in her life or in the lives of people around her that she could not have done by pulling the strings herself. That personality is part of the background for this story too. That is the setting against which the love story is going to take place-- a time of physical and spiritual darkness and need and hurt, of cultures that clashed, poverty, widowhood, and then the human personality of Naomi.

Now let us look at the heroine of our story. Verse 15:

Then she said, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister- in- law." But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me." When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

And in chapter 2, verses 11--12, we read:

And Boaz answered and said to her, "All that you have done for your mother- in- law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge."

Ruth's character, her spirit, her example, are a great statement of scripture to contradict a frequent rationalization for sin, one which goes this way, "I have been badly treated I have had circumstances over which I had, control undermine me . I have been hurt, therefore I have the right to be angry and resentful. And if you had suffered like me, you would be angry too." Without even realizing it, we often allow ourselves to rationalize that way.

But Ruth's example here is a direct contradiction to that frame of mind. Like Naomi, she was a widow, and she was living in a foreign land without any support from her own people. She had faced every dire circumstance that her mother-- in-- law faced, yet she never had the same kind of reaction. Hard circumstances do not need to produce hard spirits. We can be like Ruth. We can be sensitive, servant-- hearted people even under the most difficult circumstances.

The most obvious difference between these two women is the way they relate to God. Naomi blamed God and was angry with him, but Ruth demonstrated a profound gratitude for being able to know God at all. She had grown up in Moab, and she had been taught to worship a demon as the answer to her spiritual need. We can imagine the sense of gratitude of a young girl raised under those conditions marrying into a family where the Lord God was known. We see in Ruth an example of a person who says, in effect, "The joy, the opportunity, the glory of being able to know God is so wonderful, so worthwhile, that I can rejoice no matter what my circumstances are. These temporary physical and emotional difficulties pale in their importance compared to the delight of knowing him."

And she longed to know more of God. Boaz said that she came to seek refuge under the wings of God. "Your God shall be my God," she had declared to Naomi. She knew what it was like to live in the darkness; she knew what it was like to never even know that God existed. That knowledge produced such gratitude that the other things ceased to matter. Finally, something important we can learn from observing these early statements of Ruth is that she was the kind of woman who did not just say she loved God, who did not just talk about her relationship with God. Ruth was the kind of person who, because of what God had done for her, naturally assumed a heart of service toward others. Naomi was not the easiest person in the world to love, yet it seemed natural to Ruth, having found freedom in her relationship with God, that her response should be to take the person nearest her and begin to serve her, care for her, be committed to her. Her gratitude toward God produced service toward others, so that she lacked concern for herself. Her service towards others so filled her life that she did not have time to worry and stew and resent her own experiences.

Now let us meet the other central character in this book, the man Boaz. Chapter 1, verse 22:

Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, "May the Lord be with you." And they said to him, "May the Lord bless you." Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" And the servant in charge of the reapers answered and said, "She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. And she said, 'Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves. Thus she came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been sitting in the house for a little while.'" Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw." Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" And Boaz answered and said to her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge." Then she said, "I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants." And at mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar." So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left. When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. And also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her."

Gleaning was God's welfare programme. Poor people who had no crops of their own were allowed by law, in fact the law insisted that they be allowed to move into a field after it has been harvested and pick up what was left on the ground. This is what Ruth asks her mother-in-law to be allowed to do

Boaz, on the other hand, is a man of means, apparently, a well-to-do man who had property and who had a number of people working for him. What is striking about him is the way in which he related to his subordinates, to the little people in his life. When he came to the field his first act was not to count or command or take inventory or direct. His first act was to bless his workers, to long for their spiritual health, and he received a blessing in return. He cared about the spiritual condition of the people around him. He loved God and he wanted others to love him. He also paid enough attention to the people under him that he could recognize a newcomer gleaning in the field. A selfish businessman would not have noticed the gleaners; he probably would resent them. But Boaz cared enough about people so that when he looked out on the field to bless his workers he noticed a new gleaner there. So he asks questions about her.

Every time I read this passage, I am rebuked. I ask myself about the kind of man I am; how do I treat the servant people, the subordinate people in my life? How do I treat waitresses and gas station attendants and people whose job is to take care of me, people who are there working so that I may have life easier? Do I care about them? Do I long for God's best in their life? Do I even notice if changes have taken place? Boaz did. He happened to be these people's boss, but he was very encouraging to them and apparently his workers were very responsive to him. That should not come as a surprise. A man who cares about the people who work for him is probably going to have people who are enthusiastic in what they do.

Now we are told that Ruth "happened" onto the field of Boaz. This was a large field that was divided into

sections. Ruth walked out of town and arbitrarily picked the section of the field that belonged to Boaz. She was there because she wanted to glean so that Nomi would have something to eat. She had no other motive whatever for being there. Boaz was there because he cared about his workers, and he noticed Ruth because he cared about gleaners. Because neither one of them was interested in meeting someone or anything like that, because each of them was there with a servant interest toward other people, God was able to arrange the circumstances to allow them to meet.

There is a principle here. The less concerned we are about our own needs, and the more committed we are to serving others, the more we allow God the maximum freedom to arrange things for us. God is in an absolutely free position to order things so that we can interact with people and discover truth and all kinds of wonderful experiences if we are not worried about taking care of ourselves. Secondly, it is important to realize how little we know about what is really important. Great, profound, life-- changing events may come about through very ordinary conversations. We can look back and see that the Lord did crucial things at such points when we had no clue whatever that these events were important. Since we cannot know what is important and what is not, since we cannot know what events will be life-- changing for us, we should be sensitive to everyone, open-hearted in all circumstances, generous and godly everywhere we go.

Lastly, notice the conversation, the interaction that takes place between these two people. Boaz and Ruth display an incredible natural ability to be a man and a woman, to be what God made them to be. When they met, each of them independently had a love relationship with Christ. Each of them had independently settled, once and for all, that the Lord God would meet their needs. As a result they had this natural ability to relate to each other as a man and a woman. Boaz initiates the relationship by serving the woman. In front of his workers and everybody else he honors her, first, by saying to this poor gleaner, this nobody, "I have heard that you are a godly woman." He insists that she gets enough to eat and that she sits where the workers sit, while he himself served her roasted grain. He tells his workers to pull grain stalks out of the sheaves and throw them down so that rather than just gleaning what is in the dirt, Ruth will come away with an abundance of food. He also says that he will insist that she be protected. Gleaners, apparently, were often set upon and beaten, even raped, perhaps. They did not have any power base so they could not protect themselves very well. So Boaz insists on her protection.

It seems to come naturally to him to initiate a relationship, to honor Ruth, to serve her needs, to provide for her and to protect her. And Ruth is grateful to Boaz. She is surprised because she did not expect this; she was not trying to win his favor, but in a very feminine and beautiful way she expresses her gratitude to him. There are few things in my relationship with my wife, or any of the women I know, that matter more to me than an expression of gratitude and appreciation, a kind of responsiveness to me in a relationship. Ruth did not have to work very hard at that either. It seemed to come naturally to her to be a responder, to be grateful. Verse 13 says, "indeed [you] have spoken kindly to your maidservant." The literal rendering of that would be, "you have spoken to the heart of your maidservant." This is a very powerful expression of thanks: "You have spoken to my heart. I am moved by your generosity and your kindness toward me I am grateful that you are, the kind of man you are. " There is an ease and beauty about the beginning of this relationship that is very attractive to me.

Let me review some of the things we have said already. One, circumstances do not necessarily determine your response. We've also seen that because we do not know and cannot know what events will be crucial in our lives, it is incumbent upon us to be men and women of God all the time, in every little experience as well as the big ones, because we do not know how God is going to use any given circumstance. Ruth and Boaz exemplify the need for a man and a woman in any relationship, whether it is a marriage or any other relationship, to have an independent dependence on Christ, so that each of them, having arrived at the place where they as individuals love their Lord, are grateful to him and express that gratitude by servant -- heartedness toward others.

As I study scripture, I am increasingly convinced that "being" a man or a woman is not very difficult. There really is not a whole lot to it; it comes naturally. Yet I feel that if people believed this the economy would crash, because there is a whole industry built on books and TV shows that list the things that make you a "real" woman or a "real" man. Millions of dollars are spent in this area alone every year trying to help people with that. Yet I say again that I do not think it is very hard. It is difficult to be selfless; it is difficult to be faithful, to

be so consumed with the love of Christ for us and so convinced of his goodness toward us that our need to protect ourselves and think about ourselves all the time is taken away. But having done so, having become like Ruth or Boaz by being grateful to God and servant-hearted to people, real masculinity and real femininity in a relationship come easy.

Teaching women to be women and men to be men by externals is widespread today. You have the "Total Woman" approach, where women have responsibilities and priorities AB & C and men have XY & Z. These do not coincide anywhere, they are absolutely different from each other. If we would just learn, "You take care of the checkbook and I'll take care of the babies," all problems would disappear. This is one kind of external orientation that says what it means to be a man or a woman -- differentiating utterly between them. The other is the transcendent androgyny camp. Again it is by externals, by deciding that men and women ought to act exactly the same way. You should divide the babysitting duties, the pursuit of careers, etc. Again, it is all external. You measure what happens by insisting that men and women are not at all different from each other. The same numerical approach is used to evaluate Christian leadership, TV shows, children's textbooks, etc.

A list of outward reforms from either camp will not produce mature, healthy men and women. If we would be godly, faithful, and selfless being either manly or womanly would not come very hard to us. The Scriptures say we are "fellow heirs" of the grace of life. We belong together. We belong in a kind of mutual aid and growth together but we are sidetracked by sin. If we deny sin by our faith in Christ however, we will find ourselves supportive of each other, and really masculine and feminine.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your care of us. I long, Lord, to meet Ruth and Boaz, and look forward to the day when I will be able to express my appreciation to them. We ask you, Father, to teach us to be men and women of faith, to not dwell on the externals but to be so free by what you have done for us that we don't have to ever think about ourselves again, and that you will make us servants. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Catalog No. 3627
Ruth 1:1-2:17
November 18, 1979
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