

Mother Christmas: Ruth

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Dystopian fiction is big right now.¹ These books typically focus on a society that has fallen or is falling apart—a society that dehumanizes the individuals inside of it. It's a dark and frightening type of story.

Its heroes usually run against the grain. They are awakened to the darkness and begin to move against it. This is dangerous because it's dangerous to be different in a dystopian world. When you're noticed, when you stick out, you become a target. You're vulnerable when you go against the grain. *That's when the powers-that-be come after you for disrupting the status quo.*

Today, we're going to look at a 3000-year-old dystopian heroine named Ruth. You see, she lived in Israel during the period of the judges—an extremely dark time for the nation and its people. During this era, the people repeatedly abandoned God, turning to idol-worship and relativism and self-worship. They dehumanized others. They, as the author of Judges reminds us again and again, did whatever seemed right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

That's the dark context into which Ruth walks with her mother-in-law Naomi. Both are now widows. They are alone except for one another. They've traveled back to Bethlehem, Naomi's hometown, because they've been told that there's food there. They're looking for mercy. They're looking for grace. They're looking for salvation. All at a time when these are in short supply.

Since the book of Ruth is four chapters long, we don't have time to read it all. Instead, we're going to look at some snapshots from this story. And, these snapshots will guide and instruct us as we study what God is doing thru this faithful foreigner, this dystopian heroine—Ruth.

Let's pray right now, then we'll begin looking at our snapshots.

¹ See [this](#) article in *The New Yorker*.

We'll look at just three snapshots. I gave each one a short summary caption—(1st) A Lucky Lady? (2nd) A Shrewd Seductress? And, (3rd) A Mother of Kings?

1. A Lucky Lady?

When Ruth and Naomi come back to Bethlehem, Ruth tells her mother-in-law that she's going to go out to the fields to gather grain behind the harvesting workers. This was an ancient form of welfare. The Lord had commanded the Israelites to leave whatever grain fell to the ground during the harvest for the poor (cf. Leviticus 23:22). Friends, these ladies are desperate. They are hungry. They are needy.

And, remember this is the time of the judges. When Ruth says this to Naomi, we're supposed to recognize that God's laws have been widely neglected in Israel. People are being used and abused in Israel. There is certainly no guarantee that Ruth will go unmolested among the male workforce. She is a foreigner. She is all alone. This is a risky move. We must recognize and feel that tension. When Ruth goes out, she shows courage. She puts herself at risk for her mother-in-law.

But, then, something very surprising happens. She finds a field and is treated with great generosity. The owner of the land, Boaz, blesses her. Look at the passage with me. Look at our first snapshot.

When [Ruth] sat down with the harvesters, [Boaz] offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Let her gather among the sheaves and don't reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her."

So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered....

Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" (2:14-19).

At moments like this one, we have a default phrase we often mindlessly use. We say something like—"How lucky!" or "How fortunate!" It's a common saying. If I find a \$20 bill on the ground, I think—"Lucky me!" If I can't pay all of my bills, hear a knock on my door, and the director of *Chicago P.D.* offers me \$3000 to film

in my house, I say—“What luck!” (That actually just happened to a friend of mine.) Yet, brothers and sisters, from a biblical worldview, there is no such thing as luck. No one is lucky. Nothing happens by chance.

And, Naomi recognizes this very thing when she finds out who’s treated Ruth with such generosity. When she hears that it was Boaz, Naomi breaks spontaneously into praise and worship. She says:

“The Lord bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “[Yahweh] has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” She added, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers” (2:20).

There’s no such thing as luck in the Bible. And, there’s no such thing as luck in our lives either. The Lord is always in control and working whether we’re in good or in bad times, whether in triumph or in tragedy.

When Naomi and Ruth lost their husbands, God was still sovereign over that. They weren’t merely unlucky. The Lord was in complete control. God was at work. When they had to leave Moab and move back to Bethlehem, the Lord was working. And, when Ruth wanders out to find a field to hopefully scrape-up just enough grain for the two of them to eat that day, God is *over* it and *in* it. He leads her to the field of this generous, single relative—this possible redeemer.

You see, God has plans for Ruth, and his plans don’t depend on being lucky. The Bible constantly reminds us of this fact.

- **Psalm 115:3**—“Our God is in heaven; / he does whatever pleases him.”
- **Proverbs 19:21**—“Many are the plans in [the] heart, / but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”
- **Ephesians 1:11**—“[The Lord] works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.”

We tend to embrace the doctrine of the Lord’s sovereignty in the good times while shunning it whenever we’re in the dumps. This is an extremely ironic response since this doctrine is meant to minister to and encourage us the most whenever we’re in the midst of tragedy—whenever it feels like there isn’t any hope. Friends, that’s when knowing that God is in *absolute* control is the *best* kind of news.

To see it as such, we must keep two things in mind. **First**, we must remember that this world isn't our home. Having joy and peace, food and fun, health and wealth in this life is merely a shadow of that for which we were ultimately made.

Second, we must remember that we can't see the whole landscape of eternity, but God can. And, *he is good!* The Lord's ways are infinitely higher than our ways and his thoughts absolutely grander than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9). And, in the end, Scripture tells us that, as the eternal landscape unfolds before us, we will not regret what's behind; we will not weep over the past; we won't even recall former tragedies in light of the glory that's before us (Romans 8:18).

So, friends, don't you want a God who is in control in the midst of tragedies? Don't you want to trust that in the brokenness of this world—in the face of disease and catastrophe and death—that you have a *good* God who stands over all of these? A God who can turn them upside-down? A God who can see the end of all things? A God who, with wisdom and compassion, is leading you home?

Don't go in for an impotent, powerless god. That's not the God of the Bible. That's really no god at all.

Well, let's move to our second snapshot.

2. A Shrewd Seductress?

Is that who Ruth is? Is that what's going on here? Let's look at the text again. Let's see what it tells us.

One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

"I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do (3:1-6).

We live in a society enamored by sex. Sex sells. Our movies and commercials and novels and magazines exploit its allure all the time. They exploit and distort us. Because of this, we don't read passages like this one well. We immediately imagine that Naomi and Ruth are trying to sexually seduce Boaz...but, *slow down!*

Natalie and I like to watch the BBC's *Human Planet*. And sometimes the show will depict the mating rituals practiced by various people-groups around the world. Sometimes they seem normal too me, but oftentimes they seem strange and foreign. I don't understand them. The ritual—all the communication and symbolism in it—doesn't translate quickly or easily for me. There's a cultural barrier.

Something like that is happening here, I think.

As Ruth is carrying-out Naomi's plan, she asks Boaz to “spread [his] garment over” her (3:9). We might imagine this is simply a base request to jump in the sack with her, but it isn't. It's language rich with communicative symbolism. In the book of Ezekiel, these very words are found on the lips of God as he speaks to his bride—the nation of Israel. Listen to what it symbolically indicates there.

...when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine (Ezekiel 16:8).

Friends, this *is* a shrewd move by Ruth. It's not, however, an act of seduction. Rather, Ruth is proposing marriage in this richly symbolic way. She's telling Boaz: *Even as the Lord God spreads his garment over Israel and makes promises to care for her and to love her, please do that for me. Make me your wife!*

And, Boaz totally gets it. He doesn't just do whatever's right in his own eyes. He doesn't exploit Ruth's vulnerability. Instead, Boaz respects her and protects her. And, the next day, Boaz goes about making Ruth his wife by the letter of God's law. This is supposed to stick-out for us against the dark backdrop of its historical period. The Lord has preserved the faith and the faithful, even in the exceptionally wayward and sin-laden time of the judges.

Friends, we aren't to see Boaz and Ruth as especially righteous individuals. Rather, we're to see them as faithful people in an especially unrighteous time period. They are two people who try to live in a way that pleases God even when the world

around them isn't living that way. And, I think that's always the believer's struggle. I think that's our struggle today.

Every time period challenges us in different ways. The task of every Christian is to strive to conform his or her life to the word of God—to *live for Christ!*

I wonder what that looks like for you. How does the word of God challenge what's right or wrong in your eyes? How does it challenge your personal preferences or ways of doing things? Where does God's word call you to live differently?

Well, we must look briefly at our last snapshot.

3. A Mother of Kings?

Our story ends with Boaz and Ruth's marriage and the birth of their son, Obed. The tables have turned for Ruth and for Naomi. Their situation has found redemption in the person of Boaz. They are in his care now.

There's a scene near the end, where Naomi reflects on her grandson's birth. Think about how all her past fears and insecurities have been resolved with the birth of this child. For Naomi, this baby-boy tangibly represents the Lord's saving work—his faithfulness to her. And, that's how others see it too.

Celebrating the boy's birth, Naomi's friends comfort her with words of praise and prayer. Listen to what they say.

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

They celebrate Ruth's faithfulness. *And they should!*

They celebrate that Naomi is experiencing redemption presently in the person of Boaz and has the future hope of it in the person of Obed. *And they should!*

This is God's saving provision. And, these women are rightly celebrating it. However, I don't think they merely speak praises and prayers...*but prophecies too.* I believe they speak of far greater things—without even knowing it.

Our author leads us to David, Israel's great king, with a genealogy at the end of this passage. Ruth is David's great-grandmother. Truly, she is the mother of kings.

The ladies surrounding Naomi surely couldn't have known this. They were speaking of a far better guardian-redeemer than they imagined—a king after God's own heart, the poet-king David. That's what the original readers of this story would have seen. They would have looked-back at Obed's birth and celebrated that it brought David, their guardian-redeemer king.

But, friends, we're not original readers. From our place in redemptive history, we can see the greater landscape of God's work. We can see where David ended-up; we know that he was just a man; we know that he sinned; and, we know that he died. We know that we need a better guardian-redeemer than David. Brothers and sisters, you and I need great, King David's Greater Son—Jesus Christ.

Friends, when you read the book of Ruth, praise the Lord God for saving Ruth, for saving this pagan woman out of idolatry, for leading her into his covenant family, and for making her the mother of kings. **Because:** when you read about her salvation, you're reading about your salvation.

The Lord was caring for you and me when he was caring for Naomi and Ruth. He had our salvation in mind when he was saving them.

He was preparing the way for the guardian-redeemer of the world. Amen.