

Sunday January 12, 2020

Lesson 7: Ruth's Covenant With Naomi

Scripture: Ruth 1:1-18; 4: 14-20

Context:

The next lesson on covenant moves to the story of Ruth. The story of Ruth does not usually come to my mind when analyzing the word "covenant." Yet the covenant that Ruth makes with Naomi has become one of the most iconic, finding its way into marriage vows and even ordination ceremonies.

Ruth is one of the books in the Old Testament that stands by itself as a story. According to the Jewish canon, the book of Ruth is one of the Writings and in the Christian canon, the book comes between Judges and 1 Samuel because it occurs during one of the rules of the judges.¹ Many scholars cannot conclude on an author or major purpose of the book, beyond the fact that Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David.² This would have also helped King David's credibility to have someone of mixed ancestry in the midst of the family line.³ Ruth is a model proselyte and someone who shows that even Moabites can fit into the line of God's children.

Whatever the purposes may be, the book reads like a short story that captures the imagination of the readers. There is a glimpse into the portrait of rural life in ancient Israel and how women live in a patriarchal society.⁴ In the book of Ruth we learn about how people lived every day life with both the customs and traditions. Unlike the other histories of the judges, this book contains a focus explicitly on women. We learn how they will survive in an environment where there are certain expectations of men and women.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the book of Ruth is the composition. Most of the action that takes place is furthered by dialogue, which accounts for nearly two thirds of the text, a higher proportion than any other book in the Old Testament.⁵ And most of the dialogue belongs to Naomi and Ruth.

Ruth's most famous words are the covenant she makes to go with Naomi wherever she goes, vowing to never leave her and to stay beside her. The book develops her covenant and reveals that Ruth is true to her word. Every action she takes benefits both Naomi and Ruth as they overcome the harshness of the world with their covenant. They show the world that words matter and that covenants do transform lives.

¹ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 228.

² Ibid., 228.

³ Ibid., 228.

⁴ Ibid., 229.

⁵ Ibid., 228.

Application

The odds are you've heard Ruth's words to Naomi multiple times. Most weddings today will include this scripture passage as a way to explain the love and devotion that a couple should have towards one another. The words are beautiful and the image of going where a loved goes, being with their people, and their God becoming their own is powerful. And the clincher comes with the focus on death not even being the ending of the covenant. Talk about the weight of words.

Yet this covenant and story of Ruth also points to how the beautiful language is paired with action. It is very poetic to say wonderful and mighty things in front of people and to think of how the words make one appear. It is another to live out those words and put them into action.

In the case of Ruth, her vow means that Naomi is part of the package. When Boaz must inquire of taking her hand in marriage, he doesn't just receive the girl and her husband's property. He receives her former mother-in-law as part of the deal and must take care of her. Talk about a different kind of marriage proposal and receiving of in-laws!

Yet that is part of Ruth's stipulation to Boaz and reveals that she sees her words as binding. She vowed to be with Naomi and she means for her care to be considered in every situation. Ruth understands that covenant means upholding your end of the bargain and providing the care and comfort even if it costs you.

Do you fulfill the parts of your covenants that you made to care for others? It is a fair question to ask when we think of the promises we make to each other. So often our culture teaches us to think about what we can receive from others. What do I get out of this transaction? And at other times we use a covenant so that we get what we want out of a relationship without examining if we fully give in the midst of it.

And yet covenant reminds us that going back on our word violates the covenant. When we either don't take care of others or we use people, then we make that covenant something that was full of empty words. We choose the pretty part of the covenant that makes us feel good about ourselves without seeing that covenant demands something of us.

A good litmus test for any situation is to ask is who is giving and who is taking. If someone seems to always be willing to give and the other seems to only take, then it is a good indication that one of the parties doesn't understand the concept of covenant. In the case of Ruth and Naomi, there was the understanding that they were bound up in this life together and that they were to take care of each other. Both found ways to help one another in the obstacles that came their way.

As you take stock in the covenants that you find yourselves, it might be worth asking the question if there is mutual trust and concern. Is there one party who seems to be more of a taker? Is there one party who seems to be more of a giver? How can we have conversations about covenant to stress that the promises made between the parties are to be egalitarian and work both ways? What are examples of healthy covenants where you have seen people take care of each other in all seasons of life? How can you make sure that you are a giver and not just a taker? How do you hold others accountable in a covenant about giving and taking?

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