

BUT THEN HE NOTICED



A Closer Look at the Book of Ruth (CSB)

It is known that there was a famine in the land - one that was hungry on its own accord, devouring anything in its path. The land was not safe, and lives would be lost.

Naomi, and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, knew its destruction far too well. Naomi lost her husband, And Ruth her father-in-law, Ruth her husband, and Naomi her sons. The battle raged on for years before the famine waved its victory flag. There was no viable choice. Its victims needed to leave the land.

Naomi intended to return to her home town, and encouraged Ruth to do the same. Ruth replied, "...Don't plead with me to abandon you or to return and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live, your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me, and do so severely if anything but death separates you and me."

We often talk about Ruth's poetic selflessness, her devotion and desire to remain by Naomi's side, but often miss the tragic bond between the two.

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They lived through devastation and hunger. Their family was torn apart. Together, they buried the loves of their lives. They grieved - deeply. Despite their grief, each wanted something better for the other. Both were determined to guard the other's well being. Both held a deep heart of gratitude with warm wishes for peace.

Though Naomi encouraged Ruth to return to her family, giving her a blessing to move forward in a new marriage, Ruth could not leave her. She understood what Naomi had been through. Who else could have loved the deceased more? Who else could have understood what the other was feeling? Who else could have seen what the two had seen?

Ruth felt this so strongly she vowed never to leave Naomi, even begging God to punish her severely if she were to break her vow. Love, Sacrifice, and Survival is all they had known for years, and moving to a new land was not going to change it. Their compassion proved stronger than any hurt or sacrifice.

Naomi no longer had her sons in this life, but now would have a daughter, someone to love her, and help her through her grief. Ruth no longer had her husband, but would have her mother-in-law. Together, they could escape the cracks of oblivion, preventing each other from withering away.

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When Naomi returned to her homeland, the community recognized her and identified her by her name. Naomi said, "Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara ... for the almighty has made me very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty..."

Imagine the sadness. All she had been through made her unrecognizable to herself. Others knew it was her, but she could no longer identify with the woman she used to be. Life changed her. She was empty - her self-report said "nothing's left." But deep beneath the hurt- love, kindness, and compassion remained. She was broken, but not alone. Ruth was with her.

Searching for food and the need for survival was not a new concept for either, so Ruth, with Naomi's blessing, went to gather grain in a field belonging to Boaz. When he noticed her in the field, he asked the workers where she came from. They told him who she was, how she helped Naomi and wouldn't leave her side, and the story of all she had been through. They admired what they believed to be strength, noting she had been on her feet all day. Boaz went to Ruth and told her she could stay and gather grain. He reassured her that he ordered his men not to touch her. He offered her drink when she was thirsty or needed to rest. Ruth's response can steal a tear from even the hardest of hearts,

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"She fell face down, bowed to the ground and said to him, "why have I found favor with you, so that you notice me, although I am a foreigner?"

"He answered, "Everything you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband's death has been fully reported to me: how you left your father and mother and your native land, and how you came to a people who you didn't previously know."

Ruth never had time to be broken. She had to keep moving, keep standing, keep pushing forward. There wasn't a moment for vulnerability. BUT THEN, HE NOTICED. His kindness washed over her and left her melted on the ground in a complete heap of gratitude.

Someone cared for her. She had forgotten how that felt. She had been in survival mode for so long. One could say she lost most everything, but not those things which mattered most. Not her love, not her ability to persevere, not her loyalty and compassion, not her hope. See it wasn't strength that kept her going. It was hope.

How else could she have risen to the laborious task of being on her feet in despair, searching for a way, hoping for food and a fresh start, hoping someone would show her favor?

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"Imagine the relief when someone did. In one moment of grace, Boaz struck that exposed nerve of vulnerability with heartfelt kindness - in a moment she was seen, really seen. She was beautiful no doubt. Tragic and battered from life's bitter lessons, yet lovely nonetheless.

Her beauty was wrapped inside an innocent heart, one that should have burst with grief, yet didn't. Boaz saw it, and she fell to the ground. She bowed in humility. She had done all that was right, no matter the cost, and someone noticed and showed her grace.

He wasn't the only one. Naomi noticed too. She never stopped noticing. She said it early on, "you have shown kindness to the dead and to me," and she would note it again. She had a plan to provide Ruth with a life that would bless her, one she deserved, one full of harvest and goodness, one where the wells were full and not empty - a life that that would lead to a marriage with Boaz.

"Lord, Your grace is amazing and your mercies are new every morning. Forgive our blind eyes when we do not notice the needs of those around us. Please help us pause to see the hurt. Guide us to bless those in need. Help us to accept and not dismiss, to listen and not talk. Give us humble hearts full of compassion and guide us to make a change in this world. In Jesus' name, Amen.