



WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED THE LORD

*(A series about women in the Bible and in the history
of the Church)*

RUTH, THE MOABITE

Television is filled with stories of women who, starting as “outsiders” in some way, manage to work their way to the top of the corporate or social ladder. Usually they are depicted as conniving users of other people who will stop at nothing to claw their way to the pinnacles they want to reach.

But in the Old Testament’s Book of Ruth, we have an outsider who makes her way to the top by being faithful, self-sacrificing, and full of love. She is Ruth, and unlike most of those mini-series heroines, she is anything but ruthless.

The Book of Ruth stresses the “foreignness” of this young woman several times. She is even called a “stranger” and she belongs to a people who were the hated neighbors of early Israel. But like the good Samaritan or the non-Jewish centurion whose faith so impressed our Lord in the New Testament, Ruth is a fine reminder that faith and the possibility to enter the

Kingdom of God are not reserved for the chosen people. She is a good wife and daughter-in-law, and makes a place for herself in the family of her husband, Mahlon, and in the hearts of the townspeople.

We meet Ruth as a young widow facing the unknown. She is not self-pitying or resentful, even though she has been left in poverty and really has no family, since her mother-in-law Naomi plans to return to Palestine, the land of her birth. Naomi tells her two daughters-in-law to go back to their mothers' houses and start a new life for themselves. Orpah does go, but Ruth instead makes a famous and beautiful declaration of love and loyalty. She says, "Entreat me not to leave you or to return 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."

This was no small promise. The journey with Naomi was dangerous and long, especially for two unaccompanied and poor women. When they got back to Bethlehem (Naomi's original home) there was nothing awaiting them that would make their lives easy or stable.

Ruth began at the lowliest of jobs—cleaning the fragments of grain left by the reapers, following them all day long through the fields under the hot, bright sun. She did the work carefully and well, and one day came into the field of Boaz, a wealthy landowner who was also a distant cousin of Naomi. He was attracted to her, and tried to make her work as easy and pleasant as he could. It impressed him that she had shown such loyalty to Naomi, and that she seemed to accept her hard lot in life without complaint.

Each evening Ruth would tell Naomi about the happenings of the day. When she heard that Ruth had been in Boaz's field, Naomi was moved to say, "Blessed be he by the Lord, who has not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead." For she knew that Boaz was a good man, and would do his familial duty to Ruth by taking her under his protection. Naomi therefore instructed Ruth to wash and dress herself becomingly and then go to the threshing floor, where Boaz would be winnowing the grain, at night. She was to lie down near him, and wait for him to tell her what to do. This was not a sexual advance, but something more like a legal call on Boaz asking him to fulfill the duty created by his close relationship to Naomi's family. He did so honorably and with great regard for Ruth's good reputation, making sure there would be no idle gossip and letting the whole town know that Ruth was to be his wife.

The marriage of Ruth and Boaz produced a noble lineage, the House of David. As for Naomi, her friends rejoiced with the new grandmother saying that her grandson Obed "shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven

sons, has borne him." What an interesting statement in the supposedly male chauvinist Old Testament, and what a commentary on the power of love between two women who actually had no blood relationship to begin with!

So we see Ruth, who shows that self-sacrificing love can bring satisfaction, even unlooked-for satisfaction, in life. It isn't always the person who carefully "looks out for number one" who gets the good things. It is even possible, though most comedians would deny it, to have a good and fruitful relationship with one's mother-in-law.

(Most of the information in this article came from the book All of the Women of the Bible by Edith Deen.)



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