



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Ruth: A Woman to Remember Always

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The *Book of Ruth* is sandwiched in between the *Book of Judges* and *1 Samuel*. Ruth is one of only two women who have the honor of having a book of the Bible named after them, and the other book is called, *Esther*, also of the Old Testament. Interestingly, Swedenborg discovered that these two books are among those in the Bible that do not have an “inner meaning.”

Does this mean they are not important books for us to study? No. Indeed, Swedenborg himself often quoted from Paul’s books, which also have no “inner meaning.” Divine Providence put both *Ruth* and *Esther* into the canonized Scriptures, and for good reasons—they each tell stories about historical figures who demonstrated highly admirable spiritual qualities. The *Book of Ruth* only has 4 chapters in it, and so if you have not yet read it, I highly recommend it to you.

The story of Ruth contains spiritual principles with profound impact upon our lives today. She demonstrates qualities such as immense love and devotion to family, loyalty to the “Nth” degree!, especially during very painful and difficult times; her story, which is woven together closely with her mother-in-law’s life journey (a Hebrew woman named Naomi) is one that reminds me that not only is God fully capable of guiding our lives toward all that is good and true, but the Lord also loves to make great use of people whom our world might refer to as “small and seemingly insignificant.” Her story is also one of willingness to do hard work for long hours, as well as a fabulous **LOVE STORY!**

And if that weren’t enough, it’s also a love story that lifts up or exemplifies the immense importance of both women and men devoting themselves to high morals and godly behavior, being able to choose **NOT** to simply become romantically involved with just anyone during life’s tough and heartbreaking times, but instead, to move forward each day having trust and faith in your God who loves you and esteems you, and is working very, very hard to help you carve out a pathway in life that will help you feel and know deep and lasting happiness.

But enough of my actual sermon introduction! What say we dive in now to the real “meat and potatoes” of this fabulous story, and let the Lord feed us with His Love and truth, as only God can do.

So, to recap briefly the situation prior to when Ruth’s character enters the scene, we learn that the land of Judah, the heart of the Holy Land, is yet again going through a terrible famine. As Swedenborgians we know that the Holy Land corresponds to or symbolizes our own spiritual heart and mind, which are clothed by our natural bodies—the Northern Kingdom of Israel representing our thoughts and understanding of things and the Southern Kingdom of Judah signifying our “heartland,” the will region, where we feel our feelings and have affections of many kinds.

So when Scripture tells us that the Southern Kingdom, the land of Judah, is having a famine, this tells us that the Hebrews back then were suffering with a severe lack of desire to for doing good works, for being useful to God and others simply because the Lord’s goodness calls for this way of life; also, there is often a serious lack of desire to know and use spiritual truth, since such situations often also involves drought conditions! Having a lack of water within the biblical story symbolizes that the

people were suffering with a terrible lack of interest in God’s Word and the truths that love to be joined with spiritual love.

To be hungry in biblical language signifies to us that there is a lack of desire for what is good, a lack of delight in thinking about being good, and a lack of energy and commitment to do what is good---that is, to do the good that love does! A time of famine in the Bible story reflects those spiritual times in our lives when we are feeling a complete loss of desire for goodness and lovingkindness, and the delight that goes along with them, and these forms of spiritual suffering going on for a long period of time, to the extent that we can begin to feel that spiritual death is looming over us!

Returning to our great story of Ruth, we learn early in Chapter 1 that Naomi and her husband, a Jewish man named Elimelech, packed up and moved from Bethlehem (the birthplace of both Jesus and Benjamin) and settled down in the land of Moab, which was geographically located due East of Judah, separated by the Salt Sea (a.k.a. later as the Dead Sea—a fabulous, very salty sea that is usually very healing for people with achy joints and bodies by the way in case you have an opportunity to take a swim there some time!). Swedenborgian theology doesn’t have good things to say about the symbolism of the Kingdom of Moab. In short, in *Heavenly Secrets n. 2468*, we learn that our New Church teachings tell us that Moab represents the state of being and way of life when we have lost interest in worshipping God from genuine-authentic love for the Lord and others, and instead find ourselves going to church or other venues for spiritual growth simply for show, appearing holy and devout, but are actually coming from a false pretense. That is, we do it from a self-centered state of mind, only caring about the externals of it all, wanting to reject a loving-internal depth of worship. We may feel the desire for such shallow approaches to worship because we are preferring to look a appear good on the outside (in outward behavior), while inside enjoying the hellish delight of despising others in comparison to ourselves. Swedenborg compares us when we are into such fake forms of religiosity to fruits that look great and yummy on the outside, while on the inside are rotten and foul.

The story of Elimelech and Naomi choosing to set up tent in Moab during the years of the Judges is very feasible. So, they go: Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Then, tragedy strikes! Elimelech dies, from war or illness we don’t know. Then, Mahlon and Chilion find wives from among the Moabites—one is named Orpah and the other.....Ruth. They live together in Moab for 10 years, not able to have children, and then disaster strikes again, and both of Naomi’s sons die, again we are left wondering how it came to pass.

So, during their bereavement Naomi learns of good fortune coming again in the land of Bethlehem (which means “house of bread”), the famine is over! Naomi decides to return to her homeland, at first allowing her two daughters-in-law to follow, but then she realizes the unfairness of the situation, and she tells Orpah and Ruth to return home to find themselves new husbands, and she blesses them as a good Hebrew woman would. Initially both of Naomi’s daughters-in-law follow her, but Naomi insists. With tears in her eyes, Orpah obeys her forlorn mother-in-law and she returns back to her homeland of Moab. But Ruth firmly disagrees with Naomi, expressing these timeless words to

her, saying: “Behold, don’t entreat me to leave you, and to return from following after 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 will I be buried. Yahweh do so to me, and more also, if anything but death part you and me.” (Ruth 1:16-17)¹

Ruth’s words of immense family love and loyalty continue to echo today as sublime words of dedication to her new family, and to embracing a new and better faith than she had as a Moabitess woman, once sworn to King Ammon.

Naomi relents, and the two grief-stricken women go to Bethlehem. The people of that village notice Naomi returning. Then, after Naomi’s people notice her returning home, and they call out to her, Naomi says in response to them, “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara; for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and Yahweh has brought me home again empty.” (vs. 20-21)

One might anticipate that after this much loss, tragedy and grief that Naomi and Ruth would never want to return back to the land where Naomi’s God has allowed so much misfortune to strike their lives. Yet both Naomi and Ruth demonstrate great character as devoted servants of God. Ruth goes out to the local farmers and humbly asks to be allowed to glean the leftover grain that the hired reapers left over, as naturally happens.

Symbolically speaking, if this fabulous story were to have an inner meaning to it, I would say that when we find ourselves in a spiritual state of being where we have fallen into the trap of selfish ways and simply going through the motions within our chosen spiritual pathway, then these two very brave women give us a clue as to how to deal with it. Rather than continue to wallow in a spirit-less pathway of spiritual dying inside, they choose to pull themselves up by the bootstraps, so to speak, and *actively move back toward a more internal, satisfying and soulful way of living.*

Rather than giving up on their higher ideals and values in their faith journey, they chose to stick together, supporting one another, maintaining integrity with the true principles of their faith! And because of Ruth’s lovingkindness toward her mother-in-law and because of her willingness to be patient and wait for the goodness of the Lord, her faithful and true way of life is noticed by a good and loving Jewish man named Boaz, who falls in love with her and helps she and her family find a much better way of living again.

You know, being here at Almont with all of you for this week is a real *slice of Heaven for me*. I love the great, intergenerational worship, lectures, discussion groups, and also lots of fun doing activities like our annual banana hunt, skit night, and yes...playing my favorite card game, Bridge! I love being able to eat meals together, to relate with you and share important stories from our lives. I love being with the kids, and I love hearing them express themselves musically and in worship.

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But then, of course, this special week has to come to an end. Soon our normal grind of life returns, and then come our own severe temptations to begin letting go of the heavenly values and truths God gives us through His Word, and allow our lives to take on some of the qualities of what Moab represents—that is, to just “go through the motions,” behaving in ways so that we look good on the outside, while on the inside we are not engaging in ardent love for the Lord and one another. But Ruth shows us that with deep love, loyalty, having faith in the Lord’s ability to continually guide us toward what is good and true in life, God *can and does feed us with morsels of His Divine Love* we all so desperately need, want and deserve as His children. Perhaps it will help us when we find ourselves struggling with loss and tragedy, to find our way back into God’s Good Book and to read and meditate on this beautiful story, which is only 4 chapters long.

It’s up to us to allow the Divine truth of God’s holy stories to remind us as in *Ruth* that God is concerned about all people, regardless of race, nationality or status. We can let the Lord speak to us through the truth that both men and women are equally important to God. And, that there is **NO SUCH THING AS AN UNIMPORTANT PERSON IN GOD’S EYES**. For who the world considers not important, the Lord sees as in Ruth’s case the great-grandmother of King David, whose bloodline would eventually filter down into the veins of our most precious and holy God-incarnate, yes, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Remember, at the surface level of this story, few saw Ruth as an important person. She was from Moab, which was a nation that originated from an incestuous encounter between Lot and one of his daughters. Ruth was a desperately poor widow. She was living in a foreign land away from her birth family.

But God saw her as important, and in His plan for her life, *the Lord saw fit to culminate through her life becoming part of the lineage of Jesus Christ*. For you see, God’s plan typically involves using people who our world sees as **UNDERDOGS** or as **UNIMPORTANT** - those who are unimpressive from humanity’s perspective.

Truly, as Paul said it so very well, the Lord’s strength is made perfect in our weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9) Indeed, God uses “little things” and seemingly underdog folks through life to accomplish great plans!

So next week, or next month, or whenever we may feel tempted to see yourself as irrelevant and not vital to God’s overall plans, remember these many God-given feelings and memories we’ve had this week, and recall that for real, we each are a living part of God’s Heavenly Kingdom coming to life every day, *right now*, as the Holy City New Jerusalem continues being built here....among us and within us...on Earth!

Amen.