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A LOVE STORY

In the long history of the Old Testament, God's people frequently lost their focus. Time after time the promised Messiah of God's covenant had been forgotten or ignored by his people, Israel.

But God never forgot. And with the divine wisdom that humans can never hope to fathom, he often kept his promise of a Savior alive through unlikely people such as the woman featured in this book.

This is the story of Ruth. In it we see Ruth, a Moabitess, and her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, facing famine, poverty, starvation, and alienation. Their story spans the full spectrum of human emotions. We get a glimpse of the Lord's guiding hand, actively shaping their lives, bending their will to his own.

It is also a story of intrigue, of women surviving in a culture dominated by men, of Jewish tradition and law, of unflinching loyalties, and of enduring compassion. The setting is common, as are its three principal characters. But the unfolding events of this remarkable narrative are anything but common. Nor is its underlying message of redemption and grace.

Above all, the story of Ruth is a love story—of God's love for Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz; of Ruth's love for God, which overflowed in her cherished relationship with Naomi; and finally, of the mutual love between Ruth and Boaz—a mature and understanding love that moved God's history one step closer to fulfillment in the promised Messiah.

This is the story of Ruth, a foreign woman of gentile ancestry, whom God chose not only to live as an Israelite through faith but also to serve all of mankind as a critical

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link in the genealogical line of God's coming Christ. In the absence of her story, the story of our redemption would not have been complete.



Naomi shivered even though the breeze was hot and dry. Pulling her black cloak around her shattered life, she cast one last look at her son's fresh grave. Then she turned, lifted her shoulders, and slowly walked away.

Drought had driven her family out of their homeland. Naomi, Elimelech, and their two sons had lived in the hill country of Judah, west of the Dead Sea, near the village of Bethlehem. Usually this was a rich land—a land capable of producing a substantial harvest of wheat and barley—a land eagerly nourishing grapevines, olive groves, and fig trees. But the last ten years or so had been unusual: the rains had failed, the crops had withered, and famine had followed. With the drought had come much suffering and hardship for the people of Judah, who made their living from the land.

But the rains had not stopped falling in the high plateau across the Dead Sea called Moab. In Moab there was hope. In Moab the bountiful fields of grain beckoned. Naomi's husband, Elimelech, had chosen Moab as a refuge from the famine for his family. He did so even though bitterness and hatred divided the Hebrew Judaites and the pagan inhabitants of Moab. Elimelech seemed to have no other choice. He had to do something. No longer able to support his wife and their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, in Judah, Elimelech had done a reasonable thing by moving his family to this life-sustaining land that was Moab. It was to be a temporary move. Moab could never become their homeland. As soon as the rains again fell in Judah, Elimelech had every intention of returning

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his family to Bethlehem in Judah, the place of his ancestral home. Certainly the rains would come soon enough. After all, *Bethlehem* means “House of Bread.”

But Elimelech’s plans were not God’s plans. More than ten years after moving to Moab, Naomi was still living there, in Moab—alone.

Well, almost alone.

Elimelech had been the first to succumb to the grave—leaving his widow and sons to cope on their own in a foreign land and a foreign culture. And now, after ten years in Moab, Naomi’s sons were also gone. Naomi had just buried her second son—the last member of her family. Now the question was, who would provide for her?

Oh, Naomi’s sons had married, but her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, were now widows themselves. They certainly could not take care of aging Naomi. Besides, this land was not her home, nor was it the land of her God. Chemosh was the national god of Moab—a god who demanded the sacrifice of children! So when word reached Moab that the Lord had finally blessed Judah with rain—that people could again raise figs and olives, wheat and barley in Bethlehem—Naomi prepared to go home.

But Naomi’s plans to return to her homeland—the land that had long ago been given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the land of God’s promise—raised new questions about the future plans of Orpah and Ruth. They would certainly stay here in Moab. Even though they were now widows, their families would provide for them. But Naomi had come to love them. Leaving them behind would not be easy.

Judah and Moab

