

Faithful God

An exposition of the book of Ruth

by

Sinclair B. Ferguson

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For John and Ruth Murdoch

‘The LORD your God is God, the faithful God,
who keeps covenant and steadfast love’

(Deuteronomy 7:9)

‘Faithful God,
Faithful God,
All-sufficient one,
I worship you.
Shalom, my peace,
My strong deliverer,
I lift you up,
Faithful God.’

Chris Bowater[†]

‘You have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.’

(Psalm 63:7)

[†]Faithful God, Chris Bowater, © 1990 Sovereign Lifestyle Music

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Contents

	Preface	7
1	Ruth: her story and ours	9
	Ruth 1: 1-22	15
2	Narrative of surprising conversion	17
	Ruth 2: 1-23	41
3	Boaz: the proper man	43
	Ruth 3: 1-18	73
4	The midnight hour	75
	Ruth 4: 1-22	103
5	Mission accomplished	105
	Appendix: John Newton on the guidance of God	129
	Notes	137

Preface

This study of the Book of Ruth has its origins in a series of addresses given at the English-speaking conference of the Evangelical Movement of Wales in Aberystwyth in August 1996.

The spoken word and the written word are very different kinds of communication. Thus when a transcription of the addresses with a request for publication was sent to me I was not optimistic that the material would ever see the light of day. Turning spoken exposition into a written form, at least in my experience, takes longer than simply writing from scratch! That has been true of this little book also. No one is more surprised than I that, almost a decade later, these studies are now appearing in print. But preparing the material for publication has given me great pleasure in working again through the Book of Ruth.

The Aberystwyth Conference is a special event. To speak in the happy atmosphere of the packed Great Hall of the University of Wales, to enjoy the hearty singing of hundreds of Welsh voices, and morning by morning to trace with so many eager Christians the—at times nerve-racking, at times romantic—plot line of the Book of Ruth, was for me a memorable experience.

There can—and should be—great pleasure in the corporate study of Scripture. Sometimes people say as they leave church, ‘I enjoyed that . . . Oh! I shouldn’t say “enjoy”, should I? . . . but you know what I mean, don’t you?’ I have learned to respond: ‘Of course you should say it! We were made to “enjoy God” and his Word!’ A parenthesis in the original transcript of these

Faithful God

expositions has reminded me of the shared enjoyment of the Aberystwyth Conference: 'Much laughter on the tape at this point!' Readers will search these pages in vain for the cause of that particular merriment, but I nevertheless hope that the pleasures of God and his Word will still be sensed through the printed page.

Several debts have been incurred in connection with this book. In particular I would like to thank David Kingdon (now retired from the editorial management of the Press) for his encouragement to publish this material, and also the present staff of the Press. I hope that the publication of these pages will in a small way recompense them all for their patience.

The immediate stimulus to work on this book was the rediscovery of a computer disk marked 'Ruth—Aberystwyth 1996'. In the words of the book of Ruth this 'so happened' a few weeks before the marriage of our daughter. Her name is Ruth.

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Chapter One

Ruth: her story and ours

'He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.' (Psalm 91:1-4)

The book of Ruth is not a work of deep theological reasoning like Paul's epistle to the Romans, yet it is full of theology. It is not a magnificent symphony on the work of Christ like the Gospel of John, yet it ultimately points to the coming of Christ. It is not full of vivid apocalyptic imagery like the book of the Revelation, yet it traces the details of God's working in the unfolding of the events of history. It is not basic instruction about the kingdom of God like the Sermon on the Mount, yet it contains important lessons about life in that kingdom.

The book of Ruth does all this by teaching the timeless lessons illustrated in the lives of its three main characters, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. Its historical narrative carries a message of lasting contemporary relevance. As with every other part of the Bible, there are important reasons to study this book.

God-breathed Scripture

When we study Scripture we ought to have in mind Paul's words:

Faithful God

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

In our English Bibles there is a chapter division at the end of these words. But it is somewhat misleading, for Paul goes on to urge Timothy to preach the word in such a way that it will accomplish the very goals for which he has just said it was originally given. He is to 'preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching' (2 Timothy 4:2).

Thus, whenever we turn to Scripture, whether to a passage, section or book, we should ask ourselves:

1. What does it teach us?
2. In what areas of our lives does it rebuke us?
3. What healing, restoring, transforming effect does this teaching have?
4. How does this section of Scripture equip me to serve Christ better?

When we read, or listen to, the exposition of Scripture (Paul is here urging Timothy to preach it, and how to do so), the result, whether directly or indirectly, should be increased understanding in each of these four areas.

So, in studying the book of Ruth, we want to look out for:

1. *Doctrine.* Teaching about God and his ways with us that will illumine our minds and our understanding of the gospel.
2. *Reproof.* Areas in which the Spirit will touch our consciences and convict us of sin and failure.
3. *Correction.* This word sometimes carries a negative

Ruth: her story and ours

connotation for us, but the term Paul uses (*epanorthōsis*) expresses the ideas of restoration and healing. It appears outside of the New Testament in a medical context for mending and restoring a broken limb. In the Septuagint¹ (which Paul knew) it was used, for example, of the ‘rebuilding’ of the broken wall of Jerusalem.

4. *Equipping.* As a result of studying, understanding and making the Scriptures our own, we should be the better prepared to serve our Lord Jesus Christ.

Redemptive history

The book of Ruth is part of the biblical narrative of redemptive history. It describes one more stage in the purposes of God as they moved inexorably towards the final redemption of his people through Jesus Christ.

No detail of the lives of our loved ones is insignificant to those of us who love them. That is also true of Jesus. When we come by faith to love him, the details of his life, the story of his background, his family history, all come to have a new fascination for us.

This is where the book of Ruth comes in. It focuses like a microscope on part of the detailed preparation God made in order to fulfil his purposes in redemptive history. Apparently the story of a small and insignificant family, it is actually one of the building blocks in God’s preparatory work as he sovereignly directed history towards the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ. In fact, the message of the book of Ruth cannot be fully understood apart from the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. In that sense, studying it will help us to understand Christ himself—and, indeed, the whole Bible—more fully and clearly.