

*People  
of the  
Book*

— Volume 1 —

Joseph Sarah  
Peter Ruth

## Contents

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### Chapter One

JOSEPH: FORGOTTEN “FATHER” OF JESUS....2

### Chapter Two

SARAH: MOTHER OF NATIONS.....8

### Chapter Three

PETER: FRIEND, FOLLOWER AND FISHER  
OF MEN.....16

### Chapter Four

RUTH: HEROIC, HUMBLE AND HARD-  
WORKING.....22

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Plain Truth Ministries  
Pasadena, California 91129  
1-800-309-4466  
www.ptm.org

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Cover art by: Daniel Andreasen,  
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## Introduction

For several years *People of the Book* has been a popular department in *The Plain Truth* magazine.

However, Plain Truth Ministries serves hundreds of thousands who are not regular subscribers to *The Plain Truth*.

Our staff felt that the series of articles we have published giving an up close and personal look at biblical personalities would be a great service, and with this background we present Volume 1 of *People of the Book*.

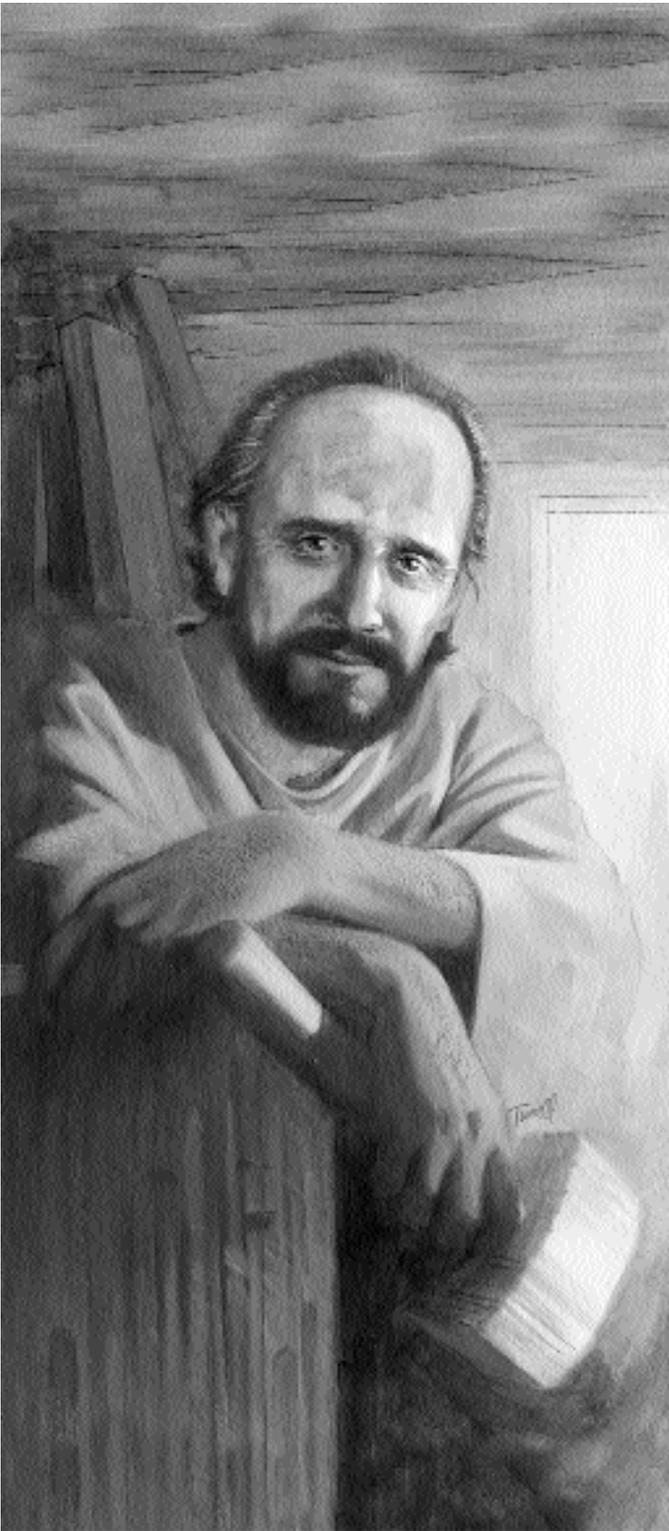
We thank God for his grace and mercy, and for his provision, making it possible for us to carry on the media work of Plain Truth Ministries.

We thank our Partners and donors, who support us financially and in prayer.

We pray that this booklet, and the other volumes to follow, will help you “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).



Greg Albrecht  
Executive Director, PTM



## Joseph: Forgotten “Father” of Jesus

Understanding stepfamilies is vital because one-third of Americans now live in stepfamily relationships. That figure will grow to 50 percent during our lifetime. Yet churches, schools and other social agencies are only just beginning to understand the different needs and special characteristics of stepfamilies. The sources of conflict are manifold:

- Stepparents disagree on the methods of discipline and nurturance.
- They differ on family rituals for the holidays.
- Scheduling joint vacations and visits can be vexing.
- Policy on privacy and space needs is always up for grabs.
- Weekly allowances and household chores are occasions for one-upmanship or ducking responsibility.
- Each set of kids will engage in loyalty conflicts and control issues with the other parent.

All that (and a whole lot more) goes into understanding and forging a new family unit out of two previous marriages with children.

Joseph is a stepfather in that his son is one not of his own flesh and blood. Jesus is not of Joseph, nor by Joseph. In keeping with orthodox Christian tradition, we can safely say Jesus was born of Mary to Joseph by divine agency (Matthew 3:17; Luke 1:32-35; Hebrews 1:5).

According to Matthew, Joseph was a son of David and a man of integrity, honor and loyalty (Matthew 1:18-25). But he was not the biological father of Jesus. Let us uncover what we can about this most neglected stepfather.

### A Conspiracy of Silence

What little we know about this Joseph is gleaned from the scant press he gets from Matthew and Luke, or terse references to “the carpenter’s son” (Matthew 13:55) or “Joseph’s son” (Luke 4:22). These might even be posthumous references. Joseph is not mentioned at all in Mark’s Gospel and only indirectly in John’s Gospel (6:42; 7:27-28). Joseph of Nazareth receives no mention in a classic, 1,128-page Bible dictionary I own.

Such silence by the patriarchal writers, early Church Fathers and current theologians is noteworthy. As forgotten as Joseph was in his day and in church history since, he becomes a forerunner of today’s noncustodial dads. Non-custodial dads are often relegated by the courts and the schools to a subsidiary and insignificant role in their children’s lives. Church historians have done the same to Joseph of Nazareth.

But wait—there’s more to this conspiracy theory. Some aspects of this story will be most intriguing for divorced dads and dads in paternity actions.

Did you know that Joseph, had he wished, could have denied paternity and filed for divorce without being liable for child support? So righteous was Joseph that he chose to quietly divorce his fiancée, Mary, as she carried a child not his.

Engagement was as binding as marriage in those days. Unfaithfulness during engagement was regarded as adultery. Because the engagement was binding, divorce was the only honorable way out. A “quiet divorce” (involving just two other witnesses) would have been more merciful to Mary than a full-blown court action.

Joseph, wanting to do the right and merciful thing, did not want to publicly disgrace her. He was later talked out of this divorce option by

an angel—a true child’s advocate—who could foresee that the best interests of the child to be born would include a continuing relationship with a father.

This angelic priority is often absent in contemporary family courts. Many divorced or absentee dads could use such a “guardian” to define and honor the best interests of the child in preserving the essential father-child bond.

Luke goes even further than Matthew to show that Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus. “[Jesus] was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph” (Luke 3:23). Luke’s genealogy (3:23-38) differs from Matthew’s (1:2-16) in several respects, especially from King David to the present. Luke’s listing reflects the line of Mary (Jesus’ blood relative), whereas Matthew’s listing traces that of Joseph (Jesus’ legal guardian). Such genealogies were compiled in order to address questions of Jesus’ paternity which persisted throughout the lives of Joseph and Mary, and well into the period of the early church.

The Roman Catholic church’s treatment of Joseph is equally intriguing. In their veneration of Mary as Virgin Mother, they have had to displace Joseph’s obvious fatherhood. Catholic writers have expunged all biblical references to Joseph as the father of any children by Mary. According to Catholic sources, Joseph not only had no sex with Mary in producing Jesus, but Mary remained a virgin all her life. Such tradition has had to ignore or delete the many biblical references to the brothers of Jesus (Matthew 12:46; 13:55; Mark 3:31; John 2:12; 7:3; 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19) and the one reference to his sisters (Matthew 13:56).

These were all presumably fathered by Joseph. To account for Jesus’ brothers and sisters, some theorize they were half-siblings, Joseph’s children from a previous marriage. If so, why aren’t all ten of the Joseph clan in our Christmas card manger scenes? (On the other hand, with an entourage of eight kids and a pregnant wife, no wonder “there was no room for

them at the inn”!)

This reasoning is faulty. A more plausible Protestant tradition holds that Joseph was the father of a total of eight children—the four sons named in Matthew 13:55, plus four anonymous daughters. All eight were born after Jesus. Ironically, having numerous children, not “virgin motherhood” or “absent fatherhood,” is what makes Mary and Joseph typical of and helpful to many Catholic parents today.

### Most Forgotten Father?

Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. However, he was a father to Jesus in the full legal or custodial sense. He did all the things that first century, full-time custodial dads did. Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem for the rite of purification or circumcision at the prescribed time (Luke 2:21-39). Joseph protected Jesus, fleeing with his family to Egypt. They were an intercontinental political refugee family, forced from Asia to Africa by the wrath and murderous intent of King Herod (Matthew 2).

After years spent as refugees, Joseph returned with his family to Nazareth of Galilee. There he mentored his sons in the family business of carpentry. The devout Joseph also took his family each year to Jerusalem for the Passover.

Protestant and Catholic traditions agree on this much: Joseph was almost certainly not alive during the adult ministry of Jesus. Mary and Jesus’ brothers are mentioned, but Joseph is conspicuously absent (Matthew 12:46; 13:55; Mark 3:31; 6:3).

He was dead before his first-born son reached the age of 30. That would explain why Joseph was overshadowed by Mary and overlooked by the gospel writers and church fathers, who focused almost entirely on Jesus’ adult life and public ministry (age 30-33).

Joseph caught only confusing glimpses of his adopted Son’s life and ministry. Upon presenting the infant Jesus at the temple for cir-

cumcision and dedication to God, Joseph and Mary were told by Simeon and the prophetess Anna that Jesus would figure in the salvation of God’s people (Luke 2:21-38). On another occasion, Jesus, at age 12, confounded the elders by skipping out on the family’s trip home. He chose instead to return to the temple and discuss theology with the rabbis (Luke 2:41-50)! His parents “did not understand what [Jesus] was saying to them” (verse 50).

However, Joseph of Nazareth must have been quite a father—to Jesus and to a quiver full of other children. How much of Jesus’ personality and character reflected the inner spirit of Joseph? We can only speculate. He was a very supportive husband and instrument of God, as well.

Joseph could see that “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52). Yet he would not live to see the fulfillment of his fathering. This father had only a veiled and partial understanding of the nature and mission of the son he was raising.

We think it sad when fathers die before giving away their sons and daughters in marriage or seeing them win at life. But Joseph’s death has greater impact in that it veils our understanding of this key founding father. What Christian dad would not like to know more about his example of parenting?

Joseph remained faithful to God, Mary and Jesus. God’s reward to Joseph was the gift any parent most desires—his precious stepson became a righteous man, obedient to God.

Their story gives us all hope that God will do as much for parents who believe God’s messengers, trust his mysterious ways and persevere, whether we see our parenting bear fruit or not. As Joseph did, so can we.

For all the above-stated reasons, I nominate Joseph of Nazareth as our “Most Forgotten Father” and the “Patron Saint of Neglected Stepfathers.” Is there a second to that nomination?...Any further discussion? (*Originally pub-*



*lished November 1999)*

## Sarah: Mother of Nations

**S**arah is best known as wife of Abraham and the “mother of nations” (Genesis 17:16). This remarkably beautiful woman, a.k.a. Sarai (both names mean “princess”) received unwelcome royal attention and skirted some potentially dangerous liaisons.

Yet throughout their journey from Ur of the Chaldeans (present-day Iraq) to Haran to Egypt to Canaan, Abraham and Sarah remained devoted to one another. Neither adversity nor prosperity could separate this couple.

Sarah’s name change is recorded in Genesis 17, along with her husband’s name change from Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of multitudes”). Throughout this study, I’ll call them Abraham and Sarah.

Sarah’s life is intertwined with Abraham’s life as joint heirs of the promise from God to become a great nation and a blessing to others (Genesis 12).

Though barren most of her life, this princess would miraculously become the mother of not one but two great nations.

At age 76, along came foster son, Ishmael (Genesis 16); at age 90, Sarah gave birth to Isaac (21:1-7).

Sarah died at age 127 (23:1), the only woman whose age at death is given in Scripture. Her faith in God is commended in Hebrews 11:11.

Scripture heralds her as an example of wifely beauty and faithful obedience (1 Peter 3:5-6).

Yet Sarah gave way to fear sometimes, and she didn't always obey. As often as not, she'd take control of the situation when Abraham defaulted.

The story of Sarah presents us with several puzzling moral questions. We'll look at three of these dilemmas in detail: one revolving around Sarah and Abraham (Genesis 11:29-31; 12:5-17; 20:1-12), one about Sarah and Hagar (Genesis 16; 21:8-14) and one featuring Sarah and Isaac (Genesis 18:12-15; 21:1-7).

In each example the real Sarah should shine through and encourage your faith to grow more Sarah-like.

We are daughters (and sons) of Sarah if we “do” what is right and do not give way to “fear” (1 Peter 3:6).

### 1) Did Abraham Have to “Lie” About Sarah?

When Abraham entered Egypt, he instructed Sarah not to tell anyone that she was his wife, but only his sister, “so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you” (Genesis 12:12-13). His fears were well founded.

Enamored with Sarah's beauty, Pharaoh took her into his house or harem, apparently as a concubine (12:15).

Subsequently, Abraham received sheep, oxen, donkeys, bondservants and camels (12:16).

Did righteous Abraham deliberately lie, put Sarah at risk and, in effect, “pimp” his half-sister/wife for what amounted to some sort of dowry or payment for services? Or is there some other ethical standard by which we should measure this “lie”?

That Abraham profited greatly from this arrangement with the Pharaoh is beyond dispute.

However, nothing in the text indicates that Abraham gave his wife to Pharaoh, nor did he barter Sarah for riches.

That Abraham received preferential treatment is typical of what any near relative to a

potential wife could have expected.

According to Josephus (first-century Jewish historian), it was a courageous, faithful Sarah who admitted to the Pharaoh the truth about their marriage; consequently, Abraham was bought off with lavish gifts.

Also, by Pharaoh's own exclamation (12:18-19), it seems that Abraham was blameworthy not so much for a blatant lie, but for not asserting more strongly the full truth about his relationship with Sarah, thus endangering Pharaoh's household.

Sarah was in fact Abraham's half-sister, born to a common father, Terah, but to a different mother (see 20:12). The reason Abraham passed Sarah off as his sister was to save their lives. Those interested in Sarah may have killed Abraham first to pursue a then-free Sarah.

However, as a brother-sister act, there'd be no need to kill him, and Sarah would only have to reject her suitors.

This she did quite successfully—not by relying on her own strength of resistance, but with the sovereign protection of God.

This point is made explicitly in Genesis 20, which records a similar encounter with another royal suitor, involving the same “lie.” Once again, God protected Israel's “first couple” for his covenant plans.

According to the Ancient Near Eastern custom of “fratriarchy,” in the absence of a father, the brother assumed legal guardianship of his sister, particularly with respect to arranging a marriage on her behalf. Therefore, Sarah's suitors would have to negotiate with “brother” Abraham.

Sadly, Abraham, the man of great faith, feared people more than God. Ironically, the heathen Pharaoh and Abimelech actually feared God more than Abraham did! Abraham should have trusted in God's power, not his own cleverness, to save their lives.

By contrast to the fearful Abraham, Sarah comes off looking relatively well in these encounters in more ways than one.

Sarah's virtue and honor were preserved, and her compliance with Abraham's plea may have been a self-sacrifice on behalf of her husband.

## 2) Why Did Sarah Offer Hagar to Abraham?

Whenever God seems slow to fulfill his promises, we often take matters into our own hands. Sarah was just like us in this regard. The Lord had promised Abraham that an heir would come from his aging body and that his descendants would be as countless as the stars (Genesis 15:1-5).

But while Abraham "believed the Lord" (15:6), Sarah ran out of patience. She talked Abraham into fathering children through her maidservant Hagar.

Sarah's attempt to "help" God with family planning only led to anger, bitterness and mutual recriminations with Hagar. In that culture, barrenness was a disgrace, while pregnancy was a sign of virtue and blessing.

By law, the female slave-concubine gained equality with her mistress by bearing children in her stead. We can just imagine Hagar saying something like, "My mistress Sarah is not the righteous person she appears to be. How else do you explain the many years that have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night?"

Who of us could have withstood such insults? Not Sarah, who probably imposed heavy tasks upon Hagar. She also held Abraham responsible for not checking Hagar's haughtiness towards Sarah.

Abraham is pictured here as thinking nothing of his wife, nor of Hagar, but only of himself. He ignored Sarah's maltreatment of Hagar (and vice versa), then got rid of Hagar and Ishmael. The family was terribly dysfunctional.

But God saw Hagar's affliction and preserved her son to become the ancestor of a race destined to pit the descendants of Hagar and Sarah against one another, even to this day.

A different viewpoint regarding Sarah and Hagar's relationship emerges from the Midrashim (Jewish commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures written between A.D. 400 and A.D. 1200).

According to one ancient tradition, Sarah eventually befriended Hagar, commiserated with her suffering and disavowed her long-held hate and anger.

She gallantly proposed that Ishmael and Isaac grow up as brothers—each with two mothers, one father and a rightful share of Abraham's inheritance.

The biblical record, however, indicates nothing but human enmity (Genesis 21:8-14). Ishmael, though wronged by Sarah and Abraham, was loved by God. Ishmael was not the Son of Promise, but a son of the slave woman (Genesis 17:18-21; Galatians 4:21-31).

Fourteen years later, when Abraham and Sarah were very old, God did the impossible—Sarah conceived, and the promised son Isaac was born (Genesis 21:1-7).

There's a lesson here for us. When we face difficult times or difficult people, God does something "too wonderful."

When the task seems impossible, God does something miraculous. God specializes in the difficult; the impossible just takes a little longer—25 years in Sarah's case. Something to think about next time you are confronted with an impossible situation.

## 3) Why Did Sarah Laugh?

God asked of Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh...? Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:6-14). That question helps us focus on our imperfect human expectations and how we often limit God. Abraham and Sarah were believers who followed the Lord and lived a righteous life. Yet neither were prepared for what God could do.

Both Abraham and Sarah wanted a child very much, but as their years advanced, their faith did not measure up to what God would do.

When God said their dream of children would indeed come true, it seemed so preposterous that Sarah had to laugh.

“So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will



***As Sarah’s spiritual  
sons and daughters,  
let us stay open for the  
all-too-wonderful, the  
unexpected, the  
unimaginable.***

I now have this pleasure?’

Then the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord?’

I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.’ Sarah was

afraid, so she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh.’ But he said, ‘Yes, you did laugh.’” (Genesis 18:12-15)

After the birth, Sarah laughed again—in joy. She named her child Isaac (“he who laughs”). Sarah may have been laughing for joy, but she could just as well be laughing at the absurdity of a 90-year-old becoming a mom.

Perhaps the major point is not so much that of Sarah’s laughing, but of Sarah’s lying and of God catching her at it. Sarah had actually laughed not out loud or in God’s face, but “to herself,” and she was frightened that God could read her innermost thoughts. Indeed, such an all-knowing God should inspire awe (Psalm 139:1-6).

Let us not judge Sarah with our 20/20 hindsight. Are we any different in our disbelief or fear when something terribly difficult or “too wonderful” presents itself?

How often do we limit God to what we can see, or to what has been done before? Do we not also ignore God and do stupid, cruel things that hurt ourselves or others?

Yet God is not limited by what people can or cannot do. What this all-knowing Almighty God promised Sarah was humanly impossible. Yet when we look back on this Abrahamic covenant and its fulfillment, we are reminded to never underestimate or limit God. Never.

As Sarah’s spiritual sons and daughters, let us stay open for the all-too-wonderful, the unexpected, the unimaginable.

In a saying made famous by the missionary William Carey (1761-1834), but first learned by Sarah, let us “attempt great things for God, and expect great things from God. (*Originally published September 2000*)



## Peter: Friend, Follower and Fisher of Men

Jesus' first words to Peter were "Follow me" (Mark 1:17). "Follow me" were also his last words to Peter (John 21:22). The Galilean fisherman spent the second half of his life patterning himself after his Master and becoming a "fisher of men." But not without stumbling several times. Following Jesus in a disciple-teacher relationship defined what Peter was all about, from first encounter to last.

Through several life-defining moments, Peter came to understand what it meant to follow Jesus as Lord. As another evangelist aptly put it, "If Jesus is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all." In the way the apostle came to accept this truth, we see our own struggles in discipleship. To learn more from his example, we will focus on three climactic "acts of the apostle."

### Fearful Fisherman Becomes Faithful Follower

On that first occasion, Jesus gave "Simon son of John" a new name that would prove both ironic and prophetic. Jesus renamed him *Cephas* (Aramaic) or *Peter* (Greek), which roughly translates to "Rocky" (contemporary American).

Ironically, Peter the Rock was fickle and foolish for much of his three-year journey with Jesus. But Jesus saw in Peter the beautiful rock-like qualities that, by God's grace, would transform Peter into a firm foundation for the church. The great Disciplemaker sees not just what we are or were but, by God's grace, what we will become.

Simon Peter's initial run at discipleship did not last long. Perhaps the going got tough and he got going, back to fishing with his buddies. In the next meeting between the two (see Luke 5:1-11), the fearful fisherman readily recognized Jesus as "Master" and "Lord." Seizing the moment for an object lesson, the Master commandeered Simon's boat and commanded him, "Put out into the deep." He then instructed him when and where to catch fish.

Having fished all night without catching a thing, Simon objected, saying in effect, "You must be a novice. Don't you know fish are not in the deep, but in the shallows?" But objecting to Jesus was futile. So Simon relented and let down his nets, figuring, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." But if, per chance, the Master was wrong about fishing, that was okay, too. At least that would preserve Simon's reputation and pride.

Was he in for a surprise! After obeying Jesus' command, Simon's boat began sinking under the weight of all the fish caught in their nets. Simon Peter was learning a first lesson about life under the Lordship of Christ: When Jesus takes over, he becomes Lord of our livelihood, which means surrendering our boats, dropping our nets, obeying his word and realizing our sinfulness. With Jesus at the helm, we can succeed where previously we had failed on our own.

Such a turnover can make us feel small, sinful and unworthy. Indeed, after this close encounter with God's power, Peter responds fearfully, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

But he missed the boat, so to speak. It is natural to be apprehensive about change or moving in a new direction. But we do not need to fear what Jesus can do for us, in us and through us. Peter need not have feared. Jesus promised to work with him to make him a "fisher of men." The great Disciplemaker knows what he is doing and can be trusted to bring out the God-given potential in all who drop everything to follow him whenever and wherever he calls.

Peter's commitment to follow Christ was tested

repeatedly, especially on Lake Galilee where many adventures at sea led from fear to faith. Once, while battling a storm-tossed sea without Jesus in his boat, Simon Peter was invited to get out and come to Jesus. That meant walking on water. He was doing fine until he took his eyes off Jesus and saw a wind-whipped sea. Then Jesus snatched him from the deep water and chided him for doubting (Matthew 14:22-33).

After the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord, as if coming full circle, Peter and the disciples were once again fishing all night without any luck. Then some man on shore told them where to find the fish. (See John 21:1-14, an occasion strangely reminiscent of Luke 5:1-11).

When he was told it was the Lord giving them yet another lesson in fishing by faith, Peter needed no further word. Leaving the others to haul in the fish, Peter jumped overboard and swam ashore to be the first to personally embrace his Master. In the Upper Room when Jesus washed the disciples' feet (see John 13), Peter's zeal for the Lord exceeded his wisdom. He thought it more humble to refuse Jesus' footwashing. But when chided about this, Peter reversed himself, insisting that Jesus wash not only his feet but his hands and head as well. Zeal also overcame wisdom later that same night when a brave Peter sliced off the ear of the high priest's servant who had come to arrest Jesus. For this, Peter was again rebuked (John 18:10-11).

### **Forerunner Becomes Firm Foundation**

Always listed first among the apostles (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:14-16; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13), Peter broke new ground with several "firsts":

He was the first to recognize Jesus at crucial moments—from the beaches of Galilee to the Mount of Transfiguration to the empty tomb (Mark 9:2-13; Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5). He preached the first sermon after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14-40). Much later, long after preaching the gospel to Jews from all nations, Peter was the first to realize that the Holy Spirit was meant for Gentiles, as

well as Jews (Acts 10:1-11:18). Yet he found it difficult to treat Gentiles as equals in other respects. Because his pioneering example had far-reaching effects, Peter was rebuked by Paul for this bias (Galatians 2:11-21).

However, this fervent forerunner is best known for being the first to publicly confess Jesus as the Messiah. Peter's precedent-setting, rock-like confession would be the firm foundation of the church. Confessing believers are "God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19-20).

But that initial public confession was only a qualified endorsement it turned out. Steeped in the Judaism of his day which looked for a Messiah who would liberate the Jews from the grip of Rome, Peter did not agree that the Messiah had to suffer and die. Thinking that he knew better, Peter foolishly thought he could teach Jesus a thing or two about being the Messiah. In effect, Peter was rebuking Jesus. (See Mark 8:27-9:1; Matthew 16:13-28 and Luke 9:18-27.) Words are rarely more jolting and humiliating than the subsequent rebuke delivered to Peter by Jesus, "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Peter would have sooner avoided the cross. That prompted the Lord to issue not only a stinging rebuke but also a follow-up teaching: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25).

The point of Jesus' paradoxical cost-benefit analysis was not lost on Peter, who himself was a paradox. Like us, his understanding of the gospel often left something to be desired, yet Peter lived and preached and died by the grace of that gospel. According to the Book of Acts, he was repeatedly arrested and jailed by King Herod for his fervent faith. In the two biblical epistles attributed to him (1 and 2 Peter), the

apostle encourages his fellow elders to endure suffering and persecution as the Christian's calling. According to church historians, Peter suffered a martyr's death in Rome at the hands of Emperor Nero (54-68 A.D.).

### **Failure Becomes Forgiven Friend**

The third, and perhaps most defining act of this apostle, has to do with cowardly failure and divine forgiveness. This dramatic new understanding of Jesus began innocently enough with Peter's brazen declaration of undying devotion to the Lord, "Even if all fall away, I will not" (Mark 14:29).

You know the story.... Jesus prophesied that Peter would deny that he ever knew his Master. This denial happened three times before the rooster crowed that night. But, as Peter painfully learned, with Jesus it is better to be a follower who fails than one who fails to follow.

To fail as a follower allows the Lord to restore us to friendship with him and to minister to others. Peter's three-fold denial of Christ is recorded in all four Gospels. But his three-fold affirmation by the risen Lord is recorded only in John 21:15-17, where three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you truly love me more than these?"

The pronoun these, in this context, refers either to men (Peter's friendships) or to things (perhaps Peter's fishing gear). The meaning can be taken one of three ways. Peter was being asked: (1) whether he loved these men more than Jesus, or (2) whether he loved Jesus more than these men did, or (3) whether he loved Christ more than fishing (his livelihood).

Suppose you were standing before Jesus and he asked you the same, "Do you love me more than these?" To what—relationships or things in your life—would the word "these" refer?

As you reconsider what it means to follow Jesus as Lord, reflect on the three major acts that define Peter's life. And rest assured of this final truth: Jesus has a place of ministry for those who love him more than anyone or anything. (*Originally published November 1998*)



## Ruth: Heroic, Humble and Hardworking

Of the Book of Ruth, the classic romantic Goethe (whose prolific work in the German language runs to 133 volumes) once said, “We have nothing so lovely in the whole range of epic and idyllic poetry.”

This precious gem of a short-story—noted for its compact style, vivid imagery, warm beauty, and its dramatic, rags-to-riches story line—is unique in all of Hebrew narrative art.

Written with consummate skill, the whole four-chapter story is read (in 15 minutes or less) by gracious Hebrews at every Feast of Pentecost and by devoted couples at many Christian weddings.

Yet Ruth was neither Hebrew nor Christian. She was a heathen Moabitess, a point the author makes repeatedly (Ruth 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). Moabites were a desert people living east of the Dead Sea and despised for centuries by Israelites with long memories.

Like modern-day Serbs and Kosovars, the Israelites and Moabites hated each other for their ethnic and religious differences, their ruthless military offensives and political countermeasures, their sexual prowess and immoral subterfuge. “Moabitess” was synonymous, in Jewish history, with an idolatrous and immoral woman (see Deuteronomy 23:3).

But Ruth, full of grace and virtue, broke that stereotype. Living in the dark period of the Judges, Ruth’s true faith and deep piety also shine above the dark evil of her male contem-

poraries. Scripture gives us a five-fold profile of this remarkable woman.

### Hardship Case

The first glimpse of Ruth is one of a young woman bereft of her husband and living in poverty. A famine in Bethlehem forced Naomi, her husband Elimelech, and two sons Mahlon and Kilion to go to Moab. Then Elimelech died. Naomi's twin sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah.

But after ten years, both sons died without leaving heirs (Ruth 1:1-5). Evidently they were born with fragile natures (their names meant “the sickly one” and “wasting away”). Their deaths made childless widows of Ruth and Orpah.

Without a breadwinner-husband and his material support, Ruth was thrust into biting poverty. But bitterness did not overwhelm her, as it did Naomi, who took on the name Mara meaning “bitter” or “empty” (1:13, 20-21).

### Heroic Daughter-in-Law

When they heard there was food again in Israel, the three women prepared to go there (1:6). However, at the thought of taking Ruth and Orpah from their homeland, Naomi reconsidered and told them to go back to their mothers in Moab.

Ruth and Orpah both wept openly, confirming their loyalty to Naomi. But Naomi insisted they return to Moab since she could not produce any more sons to replace the ones who died (1:11-12).

Orpah finally said good-bye, but not Ruth. Her commitment to Naomi's people, Israel, and to their God Jehovah, was at odds with her own self-interest as a foreigner and widow.

Ruth overcame Naomi's protests, disdain- ing the opportunity to return home where her prospects for getting on with life were far better. Instead, she pledged never to leave the aged Naomi. Ruth's courageous commitment held no

prospect of finding herself a husband or meeting her other needs. Her only apparent reward was in sharing the sufferings of another human being.

Ruth's devotion, expressed with unselfish passion, is the stuff of wedding vows: “Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me” (1:16-17).

Ruth was a faithful follower, pledging, “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Perhaps you have had a spouse or other friend say some such words to you. As an expression of unconditional marital love, that vow means moving from one city to another to move into the same house, with all the related adjustments that entails.

Ruth went even further, saying: “Your people will be my people and your God my God.” Two friends for life should both acknowledge the same God, who is Jesus our Lord.

But for people who bring a previous family into marriage, this pledge of “your-people-becoming-my-people” is tough to do. Translate that, “Your kids will become my very own kids.” No matter how hard they try, stepfamilies are not “blended” overnight, even with the most sincere of pledges.

But remember, Ruth's pledge of unconditional and sacrificial devotion to Naomi was like that of comrades in war:

“Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”

Few of us apart from marriage know the loyalty of a true best friend. Who of us would disregard our prospects for future success and embrace an unknown future with a decrepit in-law?

Imagine what she gave up. What would it be like for you to forsake your citizenship, your hometown roots, your family and loved ones, your property and privileges, knowing you would never again return?

I imagine that Abraham of ancient Chaldea knew this kind of uprootedness as he first set out for the Promised Land four millennia ago.

Likewise, I imagine that this year's refugees from Kosovo, involuntarily forced from their homeland and stripped of their material goods, know the uncertain refugee status that Ruth embraced.

### **Humble Convert**

Hers was no vow between married lovers (although used that way by many believers today), but rather the devotion of a young widow to her aging mother-in-law—and to the God of Naomi. Ruth must have seen that Naomi's God was true and living; by contrast, the god of her people was lifeless.

Perhaps it was a natural affection between the women, or perhaps it was Ruth's short-lived marriage to a Hebrew that taught her about the great Jehovah.

In either event, Ruth made a critical life choice to embrace the Hebrews as her people, and the Lord as her God.

### **Hardworking Refugee**

Once in Bethlehem, Naomi convinced her refugee daughter to work in the wheat fields. A law on the books of Israel permitted the poor, the homeless refugees and the aliens to "glean" leftover stalks of grain—whatever the harvesters left behind in their fields (2:2; see Leviticus 19:9; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19). So that's what the industrious Ruth set out to do.

As an alien, a young widow and working alone, Ruth was at great risk in the harvest fields. Nonetheless, she undertook this risk to provide for her mother-in-law.

In her effort to provide for Naomi (2:11),

Ruth worked all day long gleaning in the barley and wheat fields (2:7,17). The rich and godly landowner, Boaz, noticed Ruth and was drawn to her. He told his foreman to instruct the workers to secretly help the vulnerable woman. So they left behind plenty of gleanings and protected her from any harm or harassment (2:5-19).



***Ruth made a critical life choice to embrace the Hebrews as her people, and the Lord as her God.***

### **Honored Woman of God**

In Jewish culture, a dead man's nearest relative had the right to marry or "redeem" the widow of his kinsman. That made him a "kinsman-redeemer."

If he refused to fulfill that brotherly duty to extend the family name (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) and redeem their lost property (Leviticus 25:23-28), that right would pass to the next of kin. Naomi instructed Ruth to make a play for the older Boaz to fulfill that obligation.

The young “woman of noble character” did nothing to compromise the integrity of their relationship (Ruth 3:11), but did only as instructed. She asked of him, “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer” (3:9). This (still current) Middle Eastern custom was tantamount to a request for marriage.

Although Boaz was Mahlon’s relative and had a vested interest in Ruth, he did not take advantage of her vulnerability. Since he was not the immediate “next of kin,” and yet a man of honor, he waited at the city gate for a relative closer to Mahlon to “redeem” the beautiful Ruth. True love can wait. As God would have it, one relative was willing to buy Mahlon’s land, but would not marry Ruth.

That relative agreed that Boaz, instead, could marry her. To seal their arrangement, he took off one sandal and handed it to Boaz.

So the honorable Boaz married the virtuous Ruth. They had a son named Obed, who had a son named Jesse, who became the father of David, Israel’s most illustrious and beloved king. And we know from the Gospels that Jesus, the son of David, is connected through Ruth to the heathen Moabites (Matthew 1:5). That’s good news for many outsiders.

The story of Ruth is good news for all, at these five levels and more. God is vitally concerned about the plight of bereft widows and the disenfranchised poor, even to the point of redeeming one from whom would come the Messiah of all. Now Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, male and female, old and young, married and unmarried alike have a Redeemer—thanks to Ruth, who embraced Naomi’s God for all he’s worth. (*Originally published September 1999*)