

We live in a day of surface loyalty. Let me give you some quick examples:

- Hotel, airline and restaurants have cards, and they give points and other goodies to reward loyalty.
- Loyalty to a sports team usually is connected to where you live geographically.
- Loyalty has its rewards.

But what happens when they consistently lose your luggage? When you move to a new location? When values change? We swap one loyalty for another.

Today we are going to look at Ruth's story. On the surface, Ruth's story highlights the same theme as Caleb – faithfulness; however, a deeper look reveals that Ruth's faithfulness is better stated as a loyalty. These are related ideas, but have distinctions ...

- Caleb's faithfulness was an unwavering fidelity to a duty. Caleb is the ultimate man's man; he is a giant killer, even at 85 years old. You recall that God spoke through Moses, and then appeared to Israel, giving them clear direction (men need that). But ...
- Ruth's loyalty was allegiance to a person(s) based on individual choice. Ruth is the ideal ancient woman, faithfully being swept along with life's circumstances and quietly trusting God.

Foundational to Naomi and Ruth is the belief that God is in control.

- We see the hand of God quietly working in the background. 'We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Ro 8:28 NIV).'
- God's unseen hand moves through the fabric of our lives with a subtle yet profound touch weaving his plan into the tapestry of our existence.

## Ruth

### Loyalty



The main characters are introduced to us as they make decisions.

### 1. Decisions, Ruth 1.

Ruth's story begins with Elimelech making a poor decision: 'A severe famine came upon the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah left his home and went to live in the country of Moab, taking his wife and

two sons with him (Ruth 1:1 NLT).’ We can understand famine causing people to move. But perhaps Elimelech was thinking, ‘where is God in this famine?’ Elimelech moves his family from Bethlehem, that means ‘house of food,’ to Moab.

- Moab believed in child sacrifice.
- For eighteen years, Israel was in servitude to Moab (Jdg 3:14).
- It does not appear that he trusted God.
- But perhaps God is in control of the events. ‘If he holds back the rain, the earth becomes a desert. If he releases the waters, they flood the earth (Job 12:15 NIV).’

Elimelech’s decision has consequences: ‘Then Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons.

<sup>4</sup>The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth. But about ten years later, <sup>5</sup>both Mahlon and Kilion died. This left Naomi alone, without her two sons or her husband (Ruth 1:3-5 NLT).’

- Though no children were born, life was normal for ten years.
- Perhaps they were killed in a battle or died of sickness.
- The three men are all dead.

Naomi’s then makes two decisions.

- First, Naomi decides to return home because, ‘The Lord had visited His people in giving them food (1:6 NASB).’ Naomi has kept in contact with people back home and with the Lord. ‘Hers is a common-sense response to (her) outward circumstances; but spiritually, it is a move toward the Lord.’<sup>1</sup>
- While she is on the road to Israel, Naomi makes her second decision - to send these two young widows back to their home: “‘Go back to your mothers’ homes. And may the Lord reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. <sup>9</sup>May the Lord bless you with the security of another marriage.” Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept (Ruth 1:8-9 NLT).’ Orpah needed a little more convincing but eventually kisses Naomi goodbye and leaves.
- Naomi asks for God’s covenant-love (hesed) to bless them with a new husband. Here is our first hint of God’s plan: ‘Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands (Ruth 1:11 NLT)?’ The ancient plan was for a brother to marry the widow to carry on the family of the deceased. More on this later.

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<sup>1</sup> David Jackman, in Lloyd J. Ogilvie, ed., *The Preacher’s Commentary: Judges / Ruth* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), p. 309.

Unlike Orpah, Ruth clings to Naomi (v. 14). A good definition of faith is to 'hold onto a God who is faithful.'<sup>2</sup> Ruth sees something in Naomi and wanted to stay close to it.

Ruth's firm decision is to stay with Naomi. 'But Ruth replied, "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. <sup>17</sup>Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!" <sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more (Ruth 1:16-18 NLT).'

- Ruth could have returned to the familiar, her customs, culture, and god. Israel was unknown.
- But somehow, she sees God through Naomi's sufferings. 'Your God will be my God (Ruth 1:16 NLT).' She saw in Naomi a woman of deep faith while going through severe trial. Like Job saying, 'Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him (Job 13:15 NIV).'
- Loyalty often means self-denial. Loyalty to Jesus means self-denial: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (Mk 8:34 NLT).' Today, many want to be disciples but give up nothing. Ruth left her past completely behind and anticipated nothing from Naomi.

This was a turning point for both poor, hungry widows.

- When they get to Bethlehem, her friends are excited to see Naomi again. But she says, "'Don't call me Naomi," she responded. "Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. <sup>21</sup>I went away full, but the Lord has brought me home empty (Ruth 1:20-21 NLT).'
- Naomi has lost everything, she is empty; even Ruth is barren.

The chapter ends with God's timing: 'They arrived in Bethlehem in late spring, at the beginning of the barley harvest (Ruth 1:22 NLT).' God is going to fill their emptiness. Remember Loyalty has its rewards.

## **2. Filling, Ruth 2.**

As a part of the social welfare system, the wealthy allowed widows and the poor to go through the fields after the owner had harvested and gather what they could.

Ruth providentially finds herself in the fields of Boaz. 'Now there was a wealthy and influential man in Bethlehem named Boaz, who was a relative of Naomi's husband, Elimelech (Ruth 2:1 NLT).'

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<sup>2</sup> Jackman, *Judges / Ruth*, p. 321.

Again, Boaz' timing is perfect. God is the chief producer of this story, 'but His actions are concealed.'<sup>3</sup>

- He arrives to see her working the fields and inquires after her.
- God's unseen hand moves through the fabric of our lives with a subtle yet profound touch weaving his plan into the tapestry of our existence.
- 'She is a foreigner from Moab; she came back with Naomi,' says the foreman. The foreman added that she asked permission and that she worked hard.

Boaz has heard of her and approaches her and says, 'My daughter. Stay right here with us when you gather grain; don't go to any other fields. Stay right behind the young women working in my field<sup>9</sup>... follow them. I have warned the young men not to treat you roughly. And when you are thirsty, help yourself to the water they have drawn from the well (Ruth 2:8-9 NLT).'

- Outwardly, she was a poor, foreign widow, to Boaz she was 'a daughter.' Ruth melts at his feet. "'What have I done to deserve such kindness?" she asked. "I am only a foreigner (Ruth 2:10 NLT)."'
- Boaz honors her courage and loyalty. "'Yes, I know," Boaz replied. "But I also know about everything you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers (Ruth 2:11 NLT).'
- Character and self-discipline proceed blessing. We play the long game as believers. We want to finish life well and stand before Jesus and hear 'well done, good and faithful servant (Mt 25:21 NIV).'
- Boaz blesses Ruth. 'May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done (2:12 NLT).'
- By wings of refuge Boaz means God's grace. Just as God led Israel through the wilderness, he has 'carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Ex 19:4 NIV).'
- so Ruth has been brought to Bethlehem – the house of food.

Boaz goes further and has her eat with him and even shared his personal food with her. 'She ate all she wanted and still had some left over (Ruth 2:14 NLT).'

She was empty but is now full because of God's grace.

- Boaz instructs his men to leave some grain behind for her.
- God can 'do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Ep 3:20 NIV).'
- Ruth has so much, she brings abundant blessing home to Naomi. She gathered about 20 quarts of grain. Naomi is astonished at how much she was able to

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<sup>3</sup> Jackman, *Judges / Ruth*, p. 319.

gather. She is further amazed that God led Ruth to Boaz, saying, 'That man is one of our closest relatives, one of our family redeemers (Ruth 2:20 NLT).'

Chapter three is about reversing insecurity with security and grief with love.

### **3. Love, Ruth 3.**

Naomi instructs Ruth to go and lay at Boaz's feet at night in the threshing barn.

- This is strange to our dating / marriage customs, there is romance there as Boaz likes and respects Ruth, and Ruth decides to listen to her mother-in-law.
- This is an ancient custom to ask for protection and security.

It was the custom then for the owner to sleep right there to protect his crop from thieves. Boaz is in a good mood, not drunk, and falls asleep.

- Ruth lays down at his feet and takes the garment off his feet and lays it over her.
- She is asking to come into his home, as a wife - to come under his care and protection.
- This was not a sexual encounter; rather it was a polite way of stating your desires.

He was startled to find Ruth there and tells her that there is closer kinsman redeemer.

He says, "'The Lord bless you, my daughter!' Boaz exclaimed. 'You are showing even more family loyalty now than you did before, for you have not gone after a younger man, whether rich or poor. <sup>11</sup>Now don't worry about a thing, my daughter. I will do what is necessary, for everyone in town knows you are a virtuous woman. <sup>12</sup>But while it's true that I am one of your family redeemers, there is another man who is more closely related to you than I am. <sup>13</sup>Stay here tonight, and in the morning I will talk to him. If he is willing to redeem you, very well. Let him marry you. But if he is not willing, then as surely as the Lord lives, I will redeem you myself! Now lie down here until morning (Ruth 3:10-13 NLT).''

- He gave her six measures of barley to seal the promise, far more than could reasonably carry in her dress (58-95 pounds).
- He said, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed (Ruth 1:17 NLT).'

Boaz then proceeds to fulfill the laws of the land.

### **4. Marriage, Ruth 4.**

Boaz then goes to the town gates, where business was conducted.

- He then engages in a business deal with the closer kinsman redeemer.

- ‘Naomi is selling her property,’ Boaz says. The man says great. Boaz then adds, ‘the widow Ruth, a Moabitess comes with the deal.’ To which he backs down and allows the sale to Boaz.

‘Then Boaz said to the elders and to the crowd standing around, “You are witnesses that today I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion, and Mahlon. <sup>10</sup> And with the land I have acquired Ruth, the Moabite widow of Mahlon, to be my wife. This way she can have a son to carry on the family name of her dead husband and to inherit the family property here in his hometown. You are all witnesses today.” <sup>11</sup> Then the elders and all the people standing in the gate replied, “We are witnesses! May the Lord make this woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, from whom all the nation of Israel descended! May you prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. <sup>12</sup> And may the Lord give you descendants by this young woman (Ruth 4:9-12 NLT).”

This is a great story of reversals ...

- Going back / clinging
- Insecurity / security
- Grief / love
- Foreigner / daughter
- Emptiness / fullness
- Famine / abundance
- Abroad / home
- Tears / kisses

Each of the characters made decisions that either brought them closer to God, or farther from him.

- God sovereignty is big enough to include our little freewill. God’s unseen hand does not limit the freedom of Ruth and others to make decisions.
- God’s unseen hand moves through the fabric of our lives with a subtle yet profound touch weaving his plan into the tapestry of our existence.
- ‘We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Ro 8:28 NIV).’

The question at this point is, do you love him – he is calling you?

- Like Naomi, you hear today’s report of God coming to save His people, and you can return home.
- Like Ruth, you are an outsider, but something is tugging at your heart to cling to this message. God is ready to call you His son or daughter today.

All of us were foreigners, separated from God by our sin: ‘At that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without

God in the world. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ep 2:12-13 NIV).’ Jesus is like Boaz, Jesus is our kinsman redeemer who died on the cross so that you can become a daughter or son of God. He took care of the legalities.

Jesus said to ‘Repent and believe the good news (Mk 1:15 NIV)!’

Unlike romance novels, Ruth’s story shares a brief scene after the wedding ceremony.

- You see, Ruth had a son with Boaz, Perez. Everyone is happy – fully restored.
- There is also a brief and boring genealogy at the end of the story. ‘Perez was the father of Hezron. <sup>19</sup>Hezron was the father of Ram. Ram was the father of Amminadab. <sup>20</sup>Amminadab was the father of Nahshon. Nahshon was the father of Salmon. <sup>21</sup>Salmon was the father of Boaz. Boaz was the father of Obed. <sup>22</sup>Obed was the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David (Ruth 4:18-22 NLT).’
- Yes, David who became king of Israel. God’s unseen hand was working a far larger plan. This poor widow, this foreigner, was brought so thoroughly into God’s family that her descendant became king.
- Loyalty has its rewards. Ruth is only one of 4 women mentioned in Jesus’ genealogy.

Pray.