

Where You Go, I Will Go || Ruth 1 Rev. Drew Hanson || July 22, 2018

Introduction to Ruth

In John 15, Jesus says that he does not call us servants, but friends. Jesus is our Lord and Savior; Jesus is our high priest and the sacrificial lamb, he is the Messiah, God's Son, and yet he is also our friend. Throughout Scripture, we are shown examples of good friendships and how to treat friends. I don't think there is a better story of love and loyalty within a friendship than the story of Ruth. The book of Ruth is an absolute masterpiece of ancient literature. There are four chapters in Ruth, and over the next four Sundays, we'll be exploring it one chapter at a time.

So far, I've been preaching from two New Testament letters. But epistles, as these letters are called, are one of many genres found in the Bible. The Bible is filled with literature of different genres, and it's important for us to recognize that. There are narratives, short and long, there are Gospels, which are special narratives about Jesus, there is poetry and wisdom, there is prophecy and history. New Testament letters were written with specific instructions for specific churches, and thanks to the Holy Spirit, the truth of those instructions are applicable to us today. But the book of Ruth is different. Ruth is a short story. Instead of *telling* us how to live, stories *demonstrate* how to live through the lives of others. Where 1 John tells us that we must love our brothers and sisters, Ruth shows us how to love our brothers and sisters. God teaches us through stories. Jesus showed us this by teaching in parables, and Scripture is full of stories that teach us about God, the world, and ourselves.

There's a special theme in the book of Ruth that centers on a Hebrew word that nobody has ever quite figured out how to translate perfectly.

The word is *hesed*. It has been translated as lovingkindness, mercy, loyalty, kindness. At the root of the meaning is covenant, as God is often said to have *hesed* for Israel, even when Israel does not return it. Covenantal loyalty or love. I'll use faithful, loyal love to translate *hesed*. Faithful because this love is consistent and believes in the one loved, and loyal because this love is with us forever no matter what.

In this book, there are three main characters, and each shows us this loyal love in a different way. Today, we meet the first two characters: Naomi and Ruth.

Naomi

To learn about Naomi, let's look at the first five verses: *"¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband."*

Before we dig in, a little bit of trivia. Oprah Winfrey, on her birth certificate, was given the name Orpah, after Naomi's daughter-in-law in this story. So if you find yourself on Jeopardy, and Alex says "Oprah Winfrey was named after Orpah, a woman named in this Book of the Bible." You'll say, What is Ruth. Don't forget me when you win Jeopardy. You're welcome. But let's move on.

The scene of this short story is set in the days when the judges ruled. Naomi lived in a period of Israel's history when they were a group of people occupying the Promised Land, but before they had a king to unify and lead them. During this time, there were rumblings of the people wanting a king, as the other nations around them had. So this is the scene, the days of the Judges were a little like the dark ages, they weren't the days of old, like the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were long after that. They weren't the days of Moses and Joshua when God freed his people and delivered them into the Promised Land. They were a few generations after that. And they were still a few generations before King David made Israel the greatest it had ever been as their king. It wasn't a highlight of Israel's history.

So we are in these days, and there is a famine in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is an important place, we hear about it, and sing about it, every Christmas, as Jesus was born there. King David was also born there. In this story, there is a cruel irony because Bethlehem means House of Bread. In the city called the House of Bread, there was no longer bread, and Elimelech, Naomi, and their family had to leave. They sought asylum in Moab, a neighboring kingdom. During this time, their boys grew up and came to the age of marrying, and so they married Moabite women. Shortly after their marriages, before they were able to have children, disaster strikes. Naomi loses her husband. In those days, if a woman was widowed, she depended on her sons. And then Naomi's two sons die. And she's left with nothing. Except for two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Thankfully for Naomi, Ruth was committed to stay with her.

Ruth

To learn about Ruth, the second important character, let's look at verse 6-18: *⁶ Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that*

the Lord had considered his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰ They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³ would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." ¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

I love Ruth's persistence. That last sentence stands out: "When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her." She knew that Ruth's faithful, loyal love was too strong to leave Naomi alone. Naomi was a vulnerable widow and in a foreign land. Her only chance was to return to Israel and hope that the laws would help her. In Deuteronomy, God created a law to help widows, who were dangerously vulnerable at this time. A widow could marry a brother of her deceased husband. Now, the context is totally different for us today, but what's important here is that this was how God provided for widows at the time, and this was Naomi's only hope. She couldn't stay in Moab. Ruth did have a choice. She could stay in Moab where her family was and remarry, or she could become what Naomi was: a foreign widow. Doubly vulnerable. The choice is easy, right?

Ruth chooses the less logical direction. She stays with Naomi. I think she does this for two reasons. First, she loves Naomi, and must believe that two widows working together is better than a single widow returning home. Second, if we read between the lines in her famous response, we learn a deeper truth. Where you go, I will go. Ruth says. Where you lodge, I'll lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God. Your God my God. Moab had their own gods. Ruth didn't grow up with Naomi's God. Why would she choose this God in a foreign nation over the familiar gods in the nation where she'd be safe?

Naomi and her family must have demonstrated God's perfect, loyal, faithful love to Ruth in a way that she had not experienced in Moab. Once Ruth learned about the God of Israel, the God we worship today, she couldn't return to other gods. God is irresistible because God provides true, no-strings-attached, faithful, loyal love. Naomi must have demonstrated this to Ruth, and Ruth understood. And so to continue worshiping God, Ruth left her old gods and followed Naomi.

19-21

Let's finish the chapter with verses 19-21: ¹⁹ *So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"* ²⁰ *She said to them,*

*"Call me no longer Naomi,
call me Mara,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.*

²¹ *I went away full,
but the Lord has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me,
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"*

²² *So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.*

There is both despair and hope in this passage. Naomi is distraught, and she shows us how to mourn. How to cry out in pain. In a bit of irony, she says that she went away full, but came back empty. The irony is that she left because of famine, emptiness. But she was full because she had her husband and two sons. Now she only comes back with a foreign widow. But there is also a sliver of hope. This hope propels Naomi and Ruth through the rest of the story.

Where there was famine, now there is harvest. Verse 21 says, "They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest." This is part of the beauty of Scripture. Normally, we'd read right past that. In other stories, that could just be a marker of time, a way for the reader to know it was early spring, when barley is harvested.

But this sentence provides us a cliffhanger of hope. Naomi has nothing, Ruth has nothing. Only each other. Where are they going to go? What are they going to do? But here we see that God provides in seasons of loss. Naomi left Bethlehem because of famine, and now they are harvesting barley. God springs forth food and life from the earth. If you are in a season of famine in your life, the harvest is around the corner. There is always Easter Sunday after Good Friday. The sun always comes up after the darkest nights. If you are where Naomi is, know that God loves you, God shows you his love through the people around you, and the barley harvest is coming. Your life is meaningful and precious. You have infinite worth. Your barley harvest is coming.

For us – We can be like Naomi or Ruth

I said that there were three characters that demonstrated God's *hesed*, that faithful, loyal love. Naomi and Ruth are the first two, we'll meet the third next week.

Naomi shows us faithful, loyal love. She shows how to mourn, how to be brave, how to accept another, even a foreigner, as her own. Naomi has been called the female version of Job. She loses everything, and yet God always provides a sliver of hope. Naomi shows us the importance of demonstrating God's love to others. Ruth saw God's love through Naomi, and committed her life to God. Can we do that? Can we demonstrate God's faithful, loyal love to others? We are in this building this morning because we've either experienced that perfect love or we want to. Can we follow Naomi and demonstrate it to others?

Ruth shows us how to be a loyal friend, even when the odds are against us. Even when we are outsiders. Ruth shows us how to love even when we have nothing to give but ourselves. Ruth follows Naomi because Naomi demonstrated God's love to her. Who in your life has demonstrated God's love? Who helped you see God's love for you?

Reflecting on that is an important spiritual task. I have many in my life. This week when I was reflecting on it, I thought of my parents, my grandparents, my youth pastors, Cassie. I thought of the ways that I continue to learn about God's love through the relationships at this church. Who has helped you see God's love? Ruth also teaches us to leave old gods to follow the one true God. What are the false gods in your life that you need to leave to follow the one true God. We all have them. We all need to be aware of our temptation to follow false gods. Money, security, comfort. Ruth left these to follow God. If those false gods were in our way of truly following Jesus, could we leave them?

We have much to learn from Naomi and Ruth, and we will continue to do so through the next three chapters of Ruth. I encourage you over the next few days to consider reading the whole book, as it really ought to be read in one sitting. God teaches us through story, and the story of Ruth teaches us about God's faithful, loyal love and how we can demonstrate it. Let's demonstrate it as a church and as individuals. Let's faithfully and loyally love others as God has faithfully and loyally loved us.