

Ruth – a loyal friend

Ruth 1:1-22

Sometimes, even to myself, I sound like a broken record. Every time we take a look at Scripture, we need to learn the context. What has been going on in the previous passage, what comes after this section?

Knowing these things affects our understanding of the text – it helps to inform our reading of a particular story or passage.

There are only 4 chapters to the Book of Ruth and I encourage you to read the entire book. It is an easy and exciting read!

The story begins with a famine and great distress throughout Israel “in the days when the judges ruled”. As told in the chapters of Judges, the book of the Bible immediately preceding the Book of Ruth, the people of Israel had abandoned God’s ways. They had fallen into idolatry, social conditions were in chaos, famine had spread throughout the land, and a disastrous civil war ripped the country apart. When the Book of Ruth opens, we learn about a man from Bethlehem. That

sounds familiar. This Israelite man, Elimelech, took his wife, Naomi, and their two sons and moved to Moab – a move of desperation given the long enmity between Israel and Moab. But Elimelech believed the prospects for a better future, even in this foreign, enemy country, would be greater there. They had not been in Moab very long when Elimelech died. His sons had married Moabite women. 10 years later tragedy struck again. Both of Naomi's sons died, leaving their Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah, widowed.

Imagine Naomi – taken to a foreign land, she loses her husband, and then not one, but both of her sons!

Before long, Naomi got word that things in Israel had improved. She decided that she would return to her homeland. Both of her daughters-in-law wanted to go with her to Israel. Naomi insisted that they stay with their families in their own country. She told her daughters-in-law how much she appreciated their love and kindness and how they had been so good to her sons, their husbands, and their

father-in-law. She knew life would be difficult enough for them in Moab as widows but to be widows in a foreign land would be even worse. They kissed and hugged and cried. Both Ruth and Orpah wanted to stay with her, but Naomi insisted they not.

Orpah began to make her way back to the village where her parents lived. But Ruth was insistent. She begged Naomi to let her go with her. This passage has become very familiar and is often heard at weddings and in songs, "Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God."

Eventually Naomi gave in and allowed Ruth to go back to Israel with her.

There are many things to reflect upon when it comes to this brief and poignant story.

On the surface, there are some things we can easily glean from this story. But I do hope you will take the time to read the 4 chapters that compose this book and reflect upon it yourself.

It is easy to see in this story how sometimes people go above and beyond the requirements of the Law or the social norms. They do more than is expected of them. Perhaps you are like this. Perhaps you know someone like this.

Ruth, Naomi's daughter-in-law, is a foreigner in Israel. She is not required to follow the laws of Israel. She married an Israelite, but when he died, the expected thing is that she would return to the home of her parents. That's what her sister-in-law, Orpah, did. That's what Naomi, her mother-in-law, urged her to do.

David Sherbino did an excellent presentation last Wednesday night in the Speaker Series. He introduced us to a new Hebrew word – *Hesed*.

Ruth chose to demonstrate *hesed* (faithfulness, lovingkindness,

covenant love) instead. She chose to enter into the covenant of Israel and Israel's God, out of love for her mother-in-law.

Some of you know what it is like to be a foreigner. Some of you know what it is like to be a visible minority. Some of you know what it is like to be surrounded by a culture and customs and perhaps a language that is not your own. Some of us have experienced this for short periods of time as tourists. Some of us have experienced this for a large portion of our lives.

Ruth, a woman, she was childless, and she was a foreigner. Three strikes against her. Even so, she chose to become a stranger in a strange land. She chose to leave all that she had known and to go to a place she'd never been, with no assurance of security. Ruth took all these risks out of loyalty for a woman who had been so kind and helpful to her.

Both Ruth and Naomi had lost the protection and support of their husbands. They were easy targets for economic and social abuse and

exploitation. Many women in their situation resorted to prostitution simply to survive.

I am about to focus on 3 qualities of Ruth. I want you to reflect upon these and consider how you are similar or dissimilar to Ruth.

1. Ruth was a Woman of Commitment –

Ruth was all in. She had deep affection for Naomi. She did not look back – no second guesses. There is a Christian band called **For King and Country** that wrote a song called **“Burn the Ships”** – here is one verse:

“Step into a new day. We can rise up from the dust and walk away.
We can dance upon our heartache yeah, so light a match, leave the
past, burn the ships and don’t look back.”

Ruth and Naomi walked more than 50 miles back to Israel. Ruth had time to reflect on their decision. She went straight ahead with hope

and confidence. She did not compare what lay ahead to what lay behind. No second guessing. Commitment.

2. Ruth was a Woman of Courage –

Ruth lost her husband. Naomi was her last connection to him. She had the courage to intentionally become a foreigner. She had no assurance of food, shelter, clothing, customs. Despite her fear and trepidation of going into the unknown – she goes. Theologian Josh McDowell refers to ‘pulling a Ruth’ – having the courage to make big decisions with little or no certainty of the outcome. Can you think of a time when you ‘pulled a Ruth’? Do you need to?

Think about the disciple Peter. In faith he stepped out of a boat and onto the dark, choppy water to experience the bigger life God had for him – an adventure beyond his comfort zone. ‘Pulling a Ruth.’ It takes Courage.

3. Ruth was a Woman of Character –

Ruth's story is ordinary. She is not from a famous family. She was not rich. She was not a woman of status. She was a woman. She was from an enemy nation. She had nothing in her favour apart from her loyalty and bravery and faithfulness.

Isn't it interesting that the life of a foreign widow who had nothing becomes so important that she is included in the Bible? An entire book is named after her. Her name is recognized in the lineage of Jesus.

If you take the Bible seriously, you soon learn that God loves to use 'nobodies' to create history – Noah, Gideon, David, and Mary.

Ruth displays throughout her life what we refer to as the 'fruits of the Spirit' – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. Character.

I encourage you to read the 4 chapters of the Book of Ruth and appreciate the fuller story of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Do you see anything of yourself in Ruth? Think about your own personal history ... the ups and the downs. Can you think of a time

when things were tough, when things were difficult and the future looked bleak ... perhaps that was long ago, perhaps it is now.....? **Can,** or did you find the faith to be strong, to keep going forward, to live your life by the fruits of the Spirit ... kindness, compassion, courage, love? It is not always easy to see that good things are coming. It is not always easy to be confident that God is close. Can you think of a time when you 'pulled a Ruth'? Do you need to do that now?

It would have been such a shock to Ruth, if she had known the difference her life would make in her adopted country. Like Ruth, we can't always see how God is working in and through our lives ... but she kept going forward, moving into the unknown.

Consider Ruth – a woman of Commitment, Character and Courage.

With even our mustard seed of faith, may we strive to grow in each of those qualities, the fruits of the Spirit, according to God's longing for our lives.

Amen.