



We are seeing in our series *The Story* that God has chosen a specific people, the Israelites, to bestow his special blessing. He has chosen them motivated from his grace and favor, not their superior intellect or morality. His people are supposed to live faithfully to him and show the world how gracious and loving he is. But his people struggle with this tremendously. It could even be said that they fail more than they succeed.

Yet God has continued to save and rescue his people when they call out to him for help. In today's sermon we'll be looking at the story of Ruth from the book of Ruth. This is a story of faith and love, although hardships and dark time surround.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land (Ruth 1:1a).

As the Israelites approached the Promised Land, the Moabites enlisted Balaam to curse them. The Lord forbid any Moabite to enter the Temple. God delivers Israel from Moabite oppression through Ehud, the second Judge.

Elimelek took his wife Naomi and his two sons to Moab to avoid the famine. Then tragedy strikes. Elimelek dies; Naomi's sons marry Moabite women; both of Naomi's sons die.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return from there (v. 6).

Both Ruth and Orpah are going to return with Naomi. Naomi tries to persuade them to stay with their own people in Ruth 1:8b. This kindness she shows is *hesed* love, God's loyal love for his people.

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

But Ruth replied, "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 even death separates you and me" (verses 14–17).

The women of the town are shocked. Naomi left with a husband and two sons. She's returning with only a Moabite woman.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me" (verses 19–21).

She tells them to no longer call her Naomi (pleasant) but Mara (bitter). She believed God's sovereign hand of rule, but she couldn't believe God's goodness.

We always have the choice of perspective. Naomi wasn't totally full when she left; there was a famine. Naomi wasn't totally empty when she returned; she had Ruth with her. Naomi is acting in contrast to Ruth. Ruth is believing and acting in faith. Naomi is believing and blaming God instead of trusting. She's allowing her pain to shape her reality of today instead of allowing her beliefs to shape her reality.

Naomi is deep in her pit of despair. She's not even concerned that all the women in town know how bitter she is. How does a person get out of a place like this? There's lots of clinical solutions, but the faith of someone around her pulls her out. We'll see, as the story unfolds, how this happens.

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning (v. 22).

That's good because these women have no money, no food and no jobs. They had no plan but the Lord was watching them and watching out for them.

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz (2:1).

Ruth knows enough about Israelite law to know that the landowners were instructed by God to leave extra crops on the edges of the fields for foreigners and widows to eat.

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor."

Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out, entered a field and began to glean

behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The Lord be with you!”

“The Lord bless you!” they answered (verses 2–4).

Ruth didn't intentionally choose Boaz's field. The Lord was directing her steps, even though she didn't know it. The Lord takes ordinary events and small choices and uses them for us as well.

When I was 28 years old, I was a single seminary student living in Orlando, Florida. A friend of mine, Mike Conan, was interning at a church's Young Adult ministry. I was working as a Student Ministries Director in a different church. Mike asked me to come to his church and lead his group in a worship and prayer time every Sunday night. I said “yes.” This was a simple, ordinary decision.

I believed and acted in faith. The second time I was there, I saw Cassie across the room. She ended up becoming my wife!

I tell single young adults all the time to **not** obsess over getting married. Obsess about God. Believe and act in faith. God's hand of providence is on your life and he is good. When God's timing is right and you are in the right place, you'll look beside you and your future spouse will be there.

Ruth is in a good place. She's on Boaz's field. Boaz asks his field boss, Who's this lady? She is a Moabite who came back with Naomi. She just showed up at the field this morning and she's worked hard all day.

Boaz is impressed with her work ethic and the loyalty she's shown to Naomi. Boaz tells her, don't go to anyone else's field. Come back to my field every day. You will be safe here. You will be provided for here. Look how Ruth responds to Boaz's kindness.

At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?”

Boaz replied, “I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (verses 10–12).

Then Boaz makes good on his pledge. At mealtime, Ruth is invited to eat roasted grain with his paid workers. She totally fills her belly/ She has leftovers to take to Naomi! Boaz tells his workers, don't hassle Ruth. Let her gather all she wants. And every once in a while, leave some really good stalks of wheat for her. At the end of the day Ruth had 30 pounds of barley! She carried it back to Naomi with the leftovers and told her of the amazing string

of events from her day, including the detail that this guy's name was Boaz. Naomi knows this guy!

“The Lord bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” She added, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers” (v. 20).

He's a guardian-redeemer, a near relative who would marry a widow, if there were no male heirs, to provide male heirs. This allowed the property to stay “in the family.” You know Naomi's heart—bitter in the morning—is warming because of the faith of Ruth. Maybe God has a plan here. Every day for the rest of the harvest, Ruth returns to Boaz's field. Naomi and Ruth have plenty of barley.

At the end of the harvest there's a big feast as the people from the town winnow the barley. Boaz will be there and Naomi, filled with hope now, comes up with a plan for Ruth and Boaz. Ruth cleans up, puts on perfume and her best dress. She is going to make an impression! The plan is for Ruth to stay in the shadows during the party. When everyone is asleep, she is to tip toe over to where Boaz is sleeping and gently uncover his feet.

In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet!

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family” (3:8–9).

Ruth is proposing marriage to Boaz! What will Boaz say to this?

“The Lord bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character.

Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning” (verses 10–13).

Here's a twist. There's a closer relative who has the first right of refusal to marry Ruth. Boaz, being the upright man of integrity he is, will give this man the opportunity to marry her. So Boaz lays out all of the details: There's land involved—that's great. There's a Moabite woman involved—that's not great. This man says no thanks. So Boaz informs him and the elders of the town that he will marry Ruth and fulfill the family commitment to be the guardian-redeemer.

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David (Ruth 4:13–17).

It seems at this point that the story is wrapped up nicely. Ruth and Boaz are married. They've had a baby boy. This boy, Obed, has been given to Naomi to raise as her own. Obed will inherit Naomi's dead husband's land (remember Elimelek from the beginning of the story?).

Consider this act of faith that Ruth makes. Ruth has been motivated by *hesed* love from the beginning and she doesn't deviate from that now. She gives her first-born son to Naomi to raise as her own.

What if Ruth doesn't have other sons? She and Boaz won't have an heir to own their property. We see that Ruth will **not** make her decisions based on fear or logic. She continues to believe in God and act in faith.

This story ends with an amazing perspective change. The end shows how God takes simple acts of belief and faith and uses them in unforeseen, spectacular ways. We thought this story was just about one family. We thought this story illustrated and modeled for us that belief and acting in faith are rewarded, that we should do likewise.

And they named him Obed ... (v. 17b).

While Ruth was acting in faith based upon what she knew and what came into her path, God was working a much bigger and much more complicated plan. God was setting up the future King of Israel—King David. And many generations later, God was setting up the future King of everything—Jesus Christ, because Jesus is from Ruth's lineage too.

We can never know how God will use our acts of faithful love to change other people's lives. Even in the darkest times, God is still sovereignly working out his plan through ordinary, humble and faithful people. Think about the choices that lay before you today. God is always calling you to believe and act in faith. And the future implications of each of our decisions will change the lives of others. That's what God does!

Imagine now, the decisions that we face. We can't foresee the future either. But God can see it. God longs for each of us to take the step of faith that's before us today: A step of faithful love. Whatever choices you are facing today, saying "yes" in faith is the right good decision and God will use small decisions to manifest larger change.

We never know how God will use this decision. But we can stand firmly in faith that God does amazing work through the faithfulness of his people. Imagine, all of us living like this and the impact this will make.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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