

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

March 17, 2019, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Godly Women of Impact: Ruth (Ruth 1-4)

Re-introduction to sermon series:

Good morning as we continue our *Godly Women of Impact* series. I'm excited we're covering godly women in the Scriptures because, as we saw last Sunday, men and women really benefit from knowing godly women; and also because churches haven't always done a good job of encouraging and affirming the impact of godly women. We all, male and female, want our lives to matter, to make an impact, so as we come to God's Word, let's ask for His help with this.

I. Ruth's impact through loyal love

A. Introduction to Naomi, Ruth, and their problems – Ruth 1

Today we're learning from Ruth, so if you've got a Bible, turn to the Old Testament book of Ruth, chapter 1. If you're new to the Bible, Ruth is the 8th book, so towards the front. As you turn, the big numbers you see are chapter numbers and the little numbers are verse numbers,

Ruth lived during the period of the Judges, over 3,000 years ago, after Moses freed the Israelites from slavery but before Israel had a king. It was a rough time where God's people for years would forget about God and sin a lot and suffer consequences before finally returning to God.

During the time of the Judges the town of Bethlehem has a famine. A painful irony since the name Bethlehem means "house of bread." Running out of food in the "house of bread", a couple named Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons move to Moab. They find food and settle, but then more trouble comes, starting in verse 3 of chapter 1.

³ Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Verse 5 describes Naomi's devastation in a few words: "Naomi was left." Husband dead, sons dead, no grandkids, a vulnerable widow far from home, the last member of her family line.

Naomi has two daughters in law still, but they're Moabite, so other Israelites would be suspicious of them. That's because the Moabite people started through an incestuous relationship and previously the Moabites persuaded many Israelites to worship a false god and they sometimes warred against each other.

Thankfully, verse 6 brings a sliver of hope, saying God has brought food in Bethlehem, so at least Naomi can head home. Naomi's Moabite daughters in law, Orpah and Ruth, very kindly offer to go with her, but Naomi tries to talk them out of it. Verse 8:

⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? ¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— ¹³ would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!"

Suffering horribly, Naomi believes God is against her, and so she encourages her daughters-in-law to stay away and head to the comforts of home. In verse 14 Orpah tearfully takes Naomi's advice, and in verse 15 Naomi encourages Ruth to go home too.

¹⁵ "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

Naomi encourages Ruth to return not only to her family, but her gods. It's bad advice, but Naomi, in her pain, feels it's best for Ruth to grieve among her family and then start anew far away from what Naomi thinks is God's curse against her.

Naomi is persistent in this, but Ruth, whose name means "refreshment" or "friend"¹, is even more so, showing incredibly loyal love in verse 16.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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."

Ruth leaves everything to commit to her devastated mother-in-law, and to her God, a commitment so great Ruth will stay in Bethlehem even after Naomi dies and be buried with her. And back then, a foreign widow probably isn't finding legitimate work that pays enough to

¹ Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT, 94.

support herself and Naomi. So imagine, while grieving your own spouse's death, leaving everyone you know to move to a foreign land where you'll struggle to keep food on the table, and be vulnerable to racism and abuse, all to support a mother-in-law drowning in grief and bitterness towards God. That's a loyal love! And unlike Abraham, who also committed to God while moving to a new land, Ruth makes her commitment with no promise of blessing.²

Chapter 1 ends with Naomi and Ruth carrying their meager possessions 50 miles to Bethlehem. When they arrive, some women exclaim, "Can this be Naomi?"

Naomi responds, "Don't call me Naomi (which means 'pleasant'), call me Mara (which means 'bitter') because God has brought me back empty, afflicted me, and brought misfortune upon me." Imagine being Ruth here, you're grieving yourself and have left everything to support Naomi, yet Naomi says she's empty.

B. A "chance" provision as Ruth shows loyal love – Ruth 2

Let's hope things start looking up in chapter 2 since the women arrive in Bethlehem at harvest time, the long famine over. Israel didn't have life insurance or welfare back then, but God's law said to harvest their rectangular fields in a circle so the poor can take the food on the corners of the fields. However, in the rough period of the Judges, a young foreign woman looking to find food might instead find someone taking advantage of her. Even with those risks, Ruth shows loyal love again as she volunteers to search for food. Verse 3 of chapter 2:

³ 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. ⁴ Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!" "The LORD bless you!" they answered. ⁵ Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, "Who does that young woman belong to?"

The farming fields are outside of town with no visible fences, so a new foreigner won't know whose field she's in.³ The author tells us, "as it turned out", Ruth happens to choose Boaz's field. Boaz just so happens to be relative of Naomi's dead husband and just so happens to stop by when Ruth is in his field and just so happens to ask his manager about her, and just so happens to be a godly man. Verse 8:

² Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT.

³ Ibid, 138.

⁸ So Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. ⁹ Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.”

It just so happens that Boaz doesn’t only let Ruth glean in the corners of his field, Boaz gives Ruth extra food, protection, and water his men have drawn. So Ruth bows and gratefully asks, “Why do you give such favor to a foreigner?” Verse 11:

¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.”

Imagine the weight lifting from Ruth’s spirit. She started the day wondering if she’ll find any food and avoid harassment. But now Boaz responds to Ruth’s loyal love with generosity, providing for her, asking God to bless her, and inviting Ruth to eat lunch with them.

Chapter 1 already told us that Ruth is a Moabite, but it comes up five more times in chapter 2,⁴ highlighting Ruth’s isolation and vulnerability. But today, by God’s providence, Boaz starts to provide Ruth a place as she eats among the workers and is invited to work his field for the whole harvest.

After lunch, Boaz even tells his workers to help Ruth gather extra food, and by evening Ruth has 30 pounds of barley, a whole month’s wages in a single day, plus the invite to work all harvest.⁵ Ruth brings her huge haul of food back to Naomi, who excitedly responds in verse 20.

²⁰ “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.”

Naomi’s response of “The LORD bless him!” may suggest she’s giving God a second chance. While Naomi was still bitter, God graciously gave her Ruth and now Boaz, their loyal love impacting Naomi’s perspective on God.

⁴ 2:2, 6, 10, 11, 21.

⁵ Ibid, 179. Hubbard quoting the study of I. J. Gleb found in *JNES* 24 [1965].

In verse 20 Naomi also tells Ruth that Boaz is a guardian-redeemer. The “redeemer” is an extended family member with resources, and God’s law says the redeemer should take care of poor family members by doing things like repurchasing family land sold in hardship or buying back a family member who sold themselves into slavery.⁶

God’s law also says that brothers have an even higher level of responsibility to their siblings. In Deuteronomy chapter 25, God’s law commands a brother, if his brother dies, to marry his brother’s widow and raise a son in his brother’s name. The living brother takes on the expense of raising a child, who continues the dead brother’s family name, and inherits the dead brother’s part of the Promised Land. It’s hard for us to understand, but in this culture women depended on the care of a man and they thought the family line must continue, so this law reflects God’s care for the poor, childless widow.

But Boaz is not the brother of Naomi’s or Ruth’s deceased husbands, so he’s not required to do this. But Boaz is starting to fulfill the redeemer role as he lets Ruth get tons of food and water and protection at his field throughout the harvests.

After two months of harvesting, Ruth and Naomi have plenty of food. But at the end of chapter 2 the harvests are ending, so Ruth won’t be going to Boaz’s field, and in that culture it wasn’t appropriate for a single foreign woman to go visit an older landowning man, so Ruth may not see Boaz for a while.

C. The turning point as Ruth continues in loyal love – Ruth 3

So in chapter 3 Naomi hatches a radical plan that might offend our Bible belt sensitivities, starting in verse 1:

One day Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi said to her, “My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. ² Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³ Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

They didn’t have deodorant back then, and Boaz has only seen Ruth working up a sweat in his field. So Naomi suggests Ruth get dolled up. Then, once Boaz has his fill of food and

⁶ Cf. Leviticus 25.

wine celebrating the harvest, Ruth is to lie down by him, in the middle of the night, again, after he's been drinking, and let him tell her what to do. Yes, this is in your Bible.

Naomi is thinking of Ruth's interests as she seeks security for Ruth, but that doesn't necessarily mean Naomi gives the wisest advice here. Though there is an artistry to inviting marriage, and physical fertility, among the agricultural fertility of the fruitful harvest.

And as I prepared for this sermon I did find some Naomi apologists. They said multiple people sleep at the threshing floor the last night of harvest to protect their grain, so it's not a super private place. And Bethlehem is a small town where news spreads fast, so if Boaz says no, it's better if no one hears the conversation. They thought a low status foreign widow like Ruth shouldn't approach a male landowner like Boaz to initiate a conversation, let alone to propose to him, so there'll be shame if people know about a failed proposal. And Boaz is a godly guy who understands the customs, and as we'll see here, Boaz praises Ruth's actions and character.

But Ruth doesn't know that yet, and so this woman of loyal love journeys into the darkness of the threshing floor despite the risks. We continue in verse 7 of chapter 3:

⁷When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet!

Imagine the suspense for Ruth as she lies there, waiting for Boaz to awake. And Boaz's surprise as he awakes in the middle of the night and finds a woman lying there. Verse 9:

⁹“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.”

“Spread the corner of your garment over me” is a Hebrew way to ask for marriage. Now Naomi told Ruth to wait for Boaz to speak, but Ruth instead speaks first, asking Boaz to marry her and be a redeemer.

By mentioning Boaz is a redeemer, Ruth asks Boaz not just to marry her, but to support her and Naomi, repurchase Naomi's family land, and if Ruth and Boaz have a son, their son continues Naomi's family line, not Boaz's, and that son will get the land Boaz pays to repurchase. Boaz responds in verse 10:

¹⁰“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. ¹¹ 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.

Boaz is again inspired by Ruth's loyal love. Instead of marrying someone her own age, Ruth wants to marry the much older Boaz, who may already be married, so that Naomi's future and family line can be secured. Ruth's bold, loyal love drawing Boaz into a deeper commitment to his extended family. But there's a wrench in the plan in verse 12, where Boaz says:

¹² Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. ¹³ 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.”

To our surprise, Boaz is not the closest male relative, and that guy gets first opportunity to be redeemer. But Boaz assures Ruth that either way, he'll get it resolved in the morning, and Ruth lies back down, a new peace in her heart. Then Ruth leaves very early in the morning as Boaz gives her more food for Naomi. Verse 16:

¹⁶ When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?” Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her ¹⁷ and added, “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’”

Back in chapter 1, Naomi said God brought her back to Bethlehem empty. Here in verse 17, as the sun rises, Naomi hears Boaz's quote: “Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty handed.” A poetic conclusion to chapter 3, giving us hope that Naomi's family line may continue after all since ancient people connected agricultural fertility with biological fertility. But Ruth and her previous husband couldn't have children, so let's find out who'll marry Ruth and if they'll have a child in chapter 4.

D. The story resolves and surprises as loyal love is celebrated – Ruth 4

Here Boaz heads to the city gate, where official business gets done, and the closer relative stops by. In verse 1 Boaz calls him *peloni almoni* in the Hebrew. The NIV translates it “friend” in verse 1, but many commentaries say a better translation is Mr. “So and So.” That's why the King James calls the closer redeemer “Such a one” and the NET Bible calls him “John

Doe.”⁷ With Mr. “So and So’s” and the city elders’ attention, Boaz speaks in verse 3 of chapter 4:

³ Then he said to the guardian-redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. ⁴ I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.” “I will redeem it,” he said.

God’s law prohibited the permanent sale of land, but someone like Naomi, who didn’t have the resources to farm the land, could lease it for a time and then her family would get the land back at the next year of Jubilee.

But Naomi probably won’t make it to the next Jubilee and has no heirs, so “Mr. So and So’s” family will end up getting the land forever. But in verse 5, Boaz adds a new condition to this great deal.

⁵ Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man’s widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.”

This greatly changes the finances of the deal, rather than only paying some money to lease the land so that Naomi is supported, now Mr. “So and So” has to marry Ruth and support her financially and support any kids they have, and their son will get the land when he grows up.

Technically Mr. “So and So” wasn’t required to marry Ruth since he wasn’t her dead husband’s brother. So Boaz brought the city elders into the discussion to put pressure on “Mr. So and So” to honor the spirit of God’s law by redeeming Ruth if he wants the land. Verse 6:

⁶ At this, the guardian-redeemer said, “Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.”

Because Mr. “So and So” won’t sacrifice to preserve Naomi’s family name, the author does not preserve his name in the story. He’s just Mr. “So and So” in a chapter full of names. But Boaz does care, and now over 3,000 years later, we still know Boaz’s name. Verse 11 shows the people’s response to Boaz’s commitment.

⁷ Dr. Robert Chisholm’s class notes I received in seminary: “If the narrator did not know the man’s name or felt it too unimportant to include, one might expect him to simply omit a vocative altogether. By including these words, he draws attention to the man’s anonymity in the story.”

¹¹ Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem.

Ruth is not at the city gate, but we see she has found her true home. She was an isolated, poor foreigner, but after displaying such loyal love, the people now compare Ruth to the founding mothers of Israel. And the people ask God to bless Ruth and Boaz’s loyal love by making their family prominent.

Let’s see if those prayers for children and prominence are answered starting in verse 13:

¹³ 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 last time the author told us that God acted was when God ended the famine in chapter 1. But through the story, we’ve seen God’s care for Naomi worked out behind the scenes through the loyal love of Ruth and Boaz. And now, for the second time, in verse 13, God directly acts, enabling Ruth to have a son. The women celebrate in verse 14.

¹⁴ 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! ¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. ¹⁷ The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

In chapter 1, Naomi laments to the women that God brought her back empty, now Naomi listens while the women celebrate the fullness God has brought. Naomi has Ruth, whom the women say is better than seven sons. In a culture that preferred sons and thought seven was the ideal number, this is high praise for Ruth, especially in a story needing a male heir.

Naomi also has her precious grandson. Obed of course doesn’t erase the pain of Naomi’s losses, but I’ve seen how much joy a grandson can bring his grandmas because my son Grant was the first grandchild on both sides of the family. And as a dad I think it’s great, because loving grandparents are usually the only other people who fully understand how incredibly awesome your child is. And on top of that joy, little Obed brings huge meaning in that culture as the continuer of the family line and as future caregiver for Naomi.

And in verse 17 God further rewards the loyal love of Ruth and Boaz by making them the great grandparents of the great king David. Now God has answered every prayer in the book. When Boaz marries Ruth, it answers Naomi's chapter 1 prayer that Ruth would find another husband, and it answers Boaz's chapter 2 prayer that Ruth would find security.

When Ruth and Boaz have a prominent son, it answers Naomi's chapter 2 prayer that God bless Boaz. And it answers Boaz's chapter 3 prayer that God reward Ruth. And it answers the people's chapter 4 prayer that Ruth have children. And when King David appears as a descendant, it answers the people's chapter 4 prayer that Boaz become famous, and it answers the women's chapter 4 prayer that Obed become famous.

Conclusion: God brings great impact through women of loyal love

And so what starts as a story about a few seemingly insignificant people in a small town becomes huge. God taking the grieving, impoverished, foreign widow, and ensuring the line of King David through her loyal love.

I've heard a lot of church leadership stuff as a pastor: articles, podcasts, conferences, meetings, conversations, and so on. When the subject of widows comes up, it's always about caring for widows, which is a God-honoring, biblical idea.

But Ruth's story reminds us of the godly impact widows can make. As Ruth and Naomi trudged into Bethlehem, no one would have guessed this grieving, poor, Moabite widow would become a key figure in Israel's history through whom God preserves King David's line.

And perhaps here at Northwest the person God will use in the greatest way in the next season of our church's life will be a grieving, poor, foreign widow. Maybe she's already here, maybe she's coming soon. Will we see her? Listen to this quote from Christian author Carolyn Custis James about Ruth that is also true of every woman following Jesus today.

“A woman's high calling as God's image bearer renders her incapable of insignificance, no matter what has gone wrong in her life or how much she has lost. Even if her community shoves her aside, turns a deaf ear to the sound of her voice, or regards her as invisible – even if she is forced into a passive role in her community, she remains vital to God's purposes and is a solid contributor anyway. She cannot be stopped.”

As amazing as God's impact through Ruth is in this story, it becomes even more incredible in Matthew's Gospel. Over a thousand years after Ruth and Naomi, another weary pair showed up in the same town of Bethlehem needing someone to show them kindness. The

kindness Mary and Joseph received was just a stable, but it was enough, and there, the Son of God was born. Then 33 years later, just a few miles down the road from Bethlehem, Jesus becomes the redeemer as He takes the punishment for our sins on the cross and rises from the dead. Like the book of Ruth, our story starts with a funeral, dead in our sins, but ends with a wedding as we are united to Jesus as His bride, celebrating with our Redeemer, forever.

Matthew chapter 1 gives Jesus' genealogy, and there listed in the Son of God's family tree, are Ruth and Boaz. Ruth is the great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandmother of Jesus. What impact God brings through Ruth's loyal love, on Naomi, as she inspires Boaz, on the nation of Israel through her descendant David, and spreading to the entire world through her descendant Jesus. You never know how God will work through loyal love. Ruth showing us that the difference made by a woman with the loyal love of a loving God is nothing less than sensational.

So thank you ladies, for living with that loyal love. Like Ruth, you carry your own pain, your own burdens, and yet you battle with loyal love in so many places, making a godly impact with your families, our church, friends, workplaces, schools, community causes, a hurting neighbor, a ministry halfway around the world, and more. We see you, appreciate you, and thank you for showing the loyal love of our loving God! Let's pray...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.