

Sermons-Ruth-Brian Bill

Ruth: A Loyal Love Story by Brian Bill

Summary: This morning we're going to listen to a loyal love story from the Book of Ruth. Many people have said that the Book of Ruth is the most beautiful short story ever written. It's an account of anxiety, fear, love, and commitment that inflames the imagin

I like looking at old scrapbooks. For most of us, our family picture albums are stored away in boxes somewhere. Whenever I pick up one of my mom's old albums, the ancient black and white pictures start to fall out, and I get to relive the memories of my youth all over again. Pictures help us to keep the story alive.

We've pulled out a couple scrapbooks the past two weeks in order to keep God's story of redemption alive in our own lives. By flipping through the pages of some of the "lifestyles of the not-so-famous" characters of the Old Testament, we've been reminded of their stories and challenged by their faith. We looked at Hannah as a model for motherhood and last week we learned more about trust from the life of Gideon. This morning we're going to listen to a loyal love story from the Book of Ruth.

Many people have said that the Book of Ruth is the most beautiful short story ever written. It's an account of anxiety, fear, love, and commitment that inflames the imagination and soothes the soul. It begins with despair and ends with delight.

When Benjamin Franklin was the Ambassador to France, he occasionally attended the Infidels Club -- a group that spent most of its time searching for and reading literary masterpieces. On one occasion Franklin read the book of Ruth to the club, but changed the names in it so it would not be recognized as a book of the Bible. When he finished, the listeners were unanimous in their praise. They said it was one of the most beautiful short stories that they had ever heard, and demanded that he tell them where he had run across such a remarkable work of art. He loved telling them that it came from the Bible!

And, because this love story is in the Bible, it's more than just a romance novel. Romans 15:4 says, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Paul is referring here to the Old Testament, including the book of Ruth. That means we'll be taught, we'll be more able to endure tough times, and we'll be encouraged as we learn together. In the process, we'll grow in hope.

While the Book of Ruth is a super story of love and loyalty, we're separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years from its setting. In my research this week, I went on the Internet and found the website for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in New York City. I wanted to find out more about how the Book of Ruth is thought of in Jewish circles, since the Old Testament contains their sacred Scriptures.

I called them and was connected to Rabbi Pamela Wax, the assistant director of adult Jewish education. She told me that the Book of Ruth is very significant to Jewish people. In fact, about a week ago, they celebrated the festival of "Shavuot," in which the entire book is sung or read out loud. She asked if I wanted it sung and I said sure. She then proceeded to sing Ruth 1:1 to me over the phone. I wish I could have recorded it because it was so beautiful. She also told me that on the Thursday night of the festival, many people stay up all night to study the Book of Ruth. It's also customary to eat dairy foods throughout the festival because the Torah is likened to the sweetness of milk and honey. Rest assured, we're not going to be here all day and night studying Ruth, I'm certainly not going to sing to you, and we're not going to serve cheese and milk shakes (though my relatives from the "Dairy State" would love that).

There is both Old Testament and New Testament precedent for the reading of the Bible out loud before an assembly of worshipers. In Joshua 8:34-35, Joshua read all the words of the Law to the nation of Israel. In Nehemiah 8:3, "Ezra read aloud from daybreak until noon...and all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law." In 8:8, we learn that a group of Levites not only read from the Law, they "made it clear and gave the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read."

Most of the New Testament letters were to be read in their entirety to the young churches. Paul challenged the Thessalonians, "I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the churches." And, in 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul tells Timothy to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and teaching." I want to follow that model this morning, but I'm going to reverse the order. I'm going to begin with the teaching as we discuss some important background information. Then we'll listen to the reading of God's Word and finally conclude with some preaching as we look for ways to apply these loyal love lessons to our own lives.

Background Information

If you have your Bibles, please open them to the Book of Ruth. This short book of just four chapters is found between Judges and 1 Samuel.

A lot of key information is found in Ruth 1:1-5.

1. **Timing.** The events take place during the time when the judges ruled in Israel. As we've already pointed out, this was a period in which God's people would move from disobedience to defeat to deliverance. Because everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes, sin was rampant and God's people had hardened hearts. Several commentators suggest that the storyline in Ruth took place during the time when Gideon served as one of the judges.

2. **Setting.** We read in verse 1 that because there was a bad famine in Bethlehem, a man took his wife and two sons to live in the country of Moab. The famine was a consequence of the deliberate disobedience of God's people according to Deuteronomy 11:16-17: "Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the LORD's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the LORD is giving you." When we left Gideon last week, the nation had been enticed to turn away and worship false gods.

3. **Journey to Moab.** Moab was a land of rich soil and adequate rainfall so this man traveled to a place where his crops wouldn't fail. This family would have traveled north to Jerusalem and then crossed the Jordan River at the fords by Jericho. Depending on where they settled, the trip would have been about one hundred miles and would have taken about a week.

4. **Relations with Moab.** It's important to know that Moab was an eternal enemy of Israel. It's not going too far to say it's a bit like Israel and the PLO today. In Numbers 25, we read that the Moabites led Israel into sexual immorality and pagan worship. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 lays out some pretty strong words: "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt...Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live." This man is trying to flee the judgment of God on Israel and is disobeying doubly by going to live among the Moabites.

5. **Characters in the story.** The Israelite man's name was Elimelech and his wife's name was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. These two sons married Moabite women, one who was named Orpah, and the other Ruth. When we come to chapter two, we're introduced to a man named Boaz, who was a relative of Elimelech.

6. **Situation.** During their stay in Moab, Naomi's husband Elimelech died and then about ten years later, both Mahlon and Kilion also die. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are now widows. Widows in the ancient world had no social status and no economic means to survive. This would especially be true for Naomi, since she was an Israelite living in a foreign country. There was no Social Security system and she had no male protector or provider. In such a situation, widows back then would equate to the homeless in our society today.

8. **Gleaning.** God has always made provision for the poor and destitute. Leviticus 19:9-10: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God." This helps explain what Ruth was doing in chapter 2 and it also reveals a little about the character of Boaz as a man who followed the Law and cared for the poor.

9. **Kinsman redeemer.** Since God had assigned each family of each tribe a section of land, this land was extremely important (and still is) to Israel. In order to make sure it stayed in the family, the kinsman redeemer law was instituted. If a man died and left a widow and no sons, his nearest relative would be given the opportunity to buy his land and marry his widow so that she could have sons to carry on the deceased's name. This relative would be obligated, at his own expense, to buy back the property and give it back to the relative who had sold it. If the nearest relative refused, then the next closest kin would take on the role of the redeemer. There was a catch, however. The kinsman-redeemer couldn't make the decision to redeem on his own. He had to be asked by the widow to buy back her husband's land. That helps to explain what takes place in chapter 3.

10. **Corner of covering.** Chapter 3 will make you hold your breath and scratch your head. Ruth puts on perfume and dresses in her finest clothes and goes to the threshing floor to scope out sweaty Boaz. When Boaz falls asleep, Ruth takes the covers off his feet and lies down next to him! When Boaz turns over in the

middle of the night, he discovers this woman lying at his feet and wants to know who she is. She identifies herself and then says in verse 9: "Spread the corner of your covering over me, for you are my family redeemer." This same word is translated "wings" in 2:12, when Boaz says to Naomi, "May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully." Ruth is asking Boaz to shelter her under his wing and to redeem her. In short, she is making a marriage proposal to him!

11. **Town Gate.** In Chapter 4, Boaz goes to the city gates and sits down to conduct business. The gate of a city was like a courthouse, where transactions took place, and where cases were heard. This was also the place where you most likely to run into someone, kind of like Wal-Mart.

12. **Sandals.** Sandals were the ordinary footwear of the time, but were also symbolic in the relationship between a widow and her legal guardian. The giving of a sandal was like a signed contract back then, especially in cases where land was in dispute. This originated because someone would walk off a field in their sandals in order to measure it.

Now, with that as background, let's listen to this loyal love story. As you listen, in light of 2 Timothy 3:16, allow the Holy Spirit to use His living Word to "teach, rebuke, correct, and train you in righteousness so that we can be equipped for every good work." I'll be reading from the New Living Translation.

Reading of Ruth

(After reading 1:1-18, a section from Francine Rivers' book called, "Unshaken" was read as a dramatic presentation (pages 26-27)).

Love Lessons

I want to conclude this morning by drawing three lessons, or applications, from this loyal love story.

1. Surrender to God's Sovereignty.

One of the overriding themes of the Book of Ruth is the providential sovereignty of God. He is seen everywhere, weaving His purposes through events and circumstances. He uses a famine to bring a Jewish man and his family to Moab, where one of his sons marries a Moabite woman. Through the unexpected widowhood of both Naomi and Ruth, they end up in the Promised Land because they hear that the famine has ended. Naomi teaches Ruth about the things of God and Ruth make a life-changing commitment.

Then, in Ruth 2:3, we read that Ruth "just happened" to find herself in a field that belonged to Boaz. This was no coincidence! God orchestrated the events in order to accomplish His purposes. God's invisible hand steered her to that particular field on that particular day. Ruth had gone through some terrible things, but every difficulty, question, uncertainty, and broken heart became God's way of doing something better than could have happened otherwise. We find the beginning of God's grace when we come to the end of ourselves

Friend, even when you are completely unaware of what is happening, or even why something is happening, God is guiding your decisions and actions. He is working everything together for your good and His ultimate glory. Our responsibility is to surrender to His sovereignty. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way: "I trust Him so much that I do not doubt He will provide whatever I need for body and soul and He will turn to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this sad world. He is able to do this because He is almighty God; He desires to do this because He is a faithful Father."

Have you surrendered yourself to His sovereignty? Do you trust His purposes for your life, even when things look bleak? Have you discovered the glories of "God's happenings" in your life? On this Memorial Day Weekend, when we remember what the men and women in our armed forces suffered for us, this truth is brought into focus. God has brought good out of what our soldiers have suffered for our country. He has a way of working everything out.

The only survivor of a shipwreck washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He cried out to God to save him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but he only got depressed. He eventually was able to build a small hut and put his only possessions in it. But one day, after hunting for some food, he came back to his hut to find that it had gone up in flames, the smoke rolling up to the sky. He was devastated. Early the next day a ship drew near the island and rescued him. He couldn't believe it. When he came on board he said to the crew, "How did you know I was here?" To which they replied, "We saw your smoke signal."

2. Cultivate your character.

Think about Naomi for a moment. She goes to Moab with her husband and sons, leaving her friends and her country behind. We don't really know from the book whether she wanted to go or not, but we do know that she cultivated her character while she was there. She continued to walk with God, even when her two sons married Moabites. She worshiped the true God when the entire

culture bowed to Baal. She made the most of her situation by teaching Ruth about God. She had the courage to return to her land and then boldly told Ruth to make a marriage proposal to Boaz. She launched her matchmaking plan but she also knew how to be patient and wait on the Lord as she said in 3:18, "Be patient, my daughter, until we see what happens." She submitted to God's sovereignty.

Ruth reveals a woman who was extremely loyal. She stayed with her mother-in-law when she didn't have to. She put her faith in God through Naomi's example and then helped Naomi trust God when she felt like giving up. She was extremely industrious, working hard to gather grain. She was respectful and yet bold, willing to put some risk into her faith.

Boaz was a man of integrity and was greatly respected by everyone. He was known for his kindness and as a boss knew how to treat his employees. He followed the law by making sure the poor were cared for. He was a man of purity, even when he had the opportunity to be otherwise. He urged a relative to do what was right even though he wanted Ruth all along.

In the end, each of them was rewarded for cultivating their character. Naomi is now cared for, and is found holding her grandson at the end of the story. Ruth gets married and has a son who will eventually appear in King David's photo album and is in the family tree of the Messiah. Boaz gets married and has the joy of passing along his faith to future generations

Are you cultivating your character? Don't sell out, don't cave in, and don't bail on God.

3. Receive the Redeemer.

Just as Ruth saw reality in Naomi's religion, and wanted it for herself, some of you are ready to receive the redeemer into your life. Ruth and Orpah help us see the options. They both had the opportunity to turn their backs on what they were worshiping and follow the true God. Orpah had started out to follow Naomi but then bailed. Many people do that today. They start out but never make a commitment to Christ. You might see them in church for a couple times but then they vanish. God doesn't want a half-hearted commitment. He's looking for people today who will say, "Your God will be my God." Are you ready to do that?

We all need a redeemer. The Bible says that we need someone to rescue us from the slippery slope of sin. You might think that you can't possibly be forgiven for what you've done. That's not true. God can forgive anyone. He forgave a Moabite and He can give you a fresh start as well. And, just as Ruth needed to ask for redemption, so too, you need to ask Jesus to redeem you. Are you ready to curl up at the feet of Jesus and ask Him to save you?

According to the rabbi I talked to this week, one of the reasons modern-day Jews love the Book of Ruth so much is that it pictures the marriage relationship that God has with His people. He is romancing you right now. He longs to have a relationship with you, but you need to make the proposal. He's waiting for you to ask Him. Another reason why Ruth is revered is because she is the first "believer by choice" in the Bible. She put her faith in the God of Abraham voluntarily and she did so with a full-fledged commitment.

In the Old Testament, a redeemer must be related by blood, he must be able to redeem, and he must be willing. Jesus took on flesh and blood so that He could relate to us. He is able to redeem because He has paid the price for our redemption and He is more than willing. Are you?

The Book of Ruth concludes with a genealogy. Did you know there are 41 separate genealogies from Genesis to Revelation? Have you ever stopped to wonder why? These family trees are really "faith albums" of God's promises to His people. When God made the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 that all families would be blessed through him, we see that God has grafted in individuals like Rahab and Ruth in order to bring David into the world. Then, when we come to Matthew 1, we see that the lineage of Boaz and Ruth from Bethlehem ended up in David's greater Son, born of a virgin in a stable in Bethlehem.

Friend, just as God plucked Ruth out of a rough world and adopted her into the family faith tree, maybe you will be the first family in your line to follow Jesus. Your spiritual scrapbook may be brand new. Or, maybe you're continuing a long-established family tree of faithfulness. Whatever the case, you carry on a heritage that cannot afford to be squandered.

Are you ready to receive the redeemer? Do so right now.