

*The Story: Your God Will Be My God*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Psalm 146, Matthew 1 (selections), Ruth 1:1-19a*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Ruth 1:1-19a. Listen now to the Word of God. "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." 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? 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 -- 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 gone out against me!" At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, 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 anything but death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem."

How often does God actually intervene in human history? Does He do it still today, or has God hidden in the shadows? Those are difficult questions for us to answer. God creates and destroys nations in the Bible; He speaks to individuals; He does mighty miracles. But if we don't see and hear those things for ourselves, does that make God any less real?

The book of Ruth, which we read this week in chapter 9 of *The Story*, is proof positive that God works in ordinary human lives in extraordinary ways, even when He isn't officially acknowledged. In the book of Ruth, God never speaks to anybody. He's never given credit for any of the events that take place. And yet, this is a book of bold faith, one with God written on every page. Through the faith of three people, the lineage of King David – and thus, Jesus Christ – is set in stone.

Ruth is one of the shortest books in the Bible. Chronologically, it happens in the time of the judges – when exactly, we don't know. What it tells us is that even during one of the darkest periods of Israel's history, there was a faithful remnant loyal to the LORD. The story begins with a famine that leads Naomi's family to move to Moab, a nearby region that often warred with Israel. After the death of her husband, Elimelech, Naomi's sons marry Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. The family grows close. Then, an unexpected tragedy – both of Naomi's sons die. This was devastating. In a world dominated by men, it left Naomi and her recently widowed daughter-in-laws virtually helpless.

When she hears Israel's famine is over, Naomi does the logical thing; she heads home. Her prospects are bleak, but at least back in Israel there were relatives who might take pity on her. Her daughter-in-laws want to come with her, but Naomi has nothing to offer them. In a tearful farewell, she convinces Orpah to return to her people. But Ruth will not hear of it. She throws her lot in with Naomi. She makes a vow not to leave her, promising that she will become one of Naomi's people. She even will serve Yahweh, Naomi's God, the God of Israel. And so they journey to Bethlehem together.

When they arrive, it's the barley harvest. By Israel's law, the poor, the widow, and the stranger were allowed to pick whatever the harvesters missed the first time around. That's what happens here...Ruth follows behind the harvesters with the servant girls to gather enough grain for she and Naomi to survive. She catches the eye of Boaz, Naomi's relative. He's taken with her loyalty and treats her kindly, making sure she is able to gather what she needs.

Naomi understands Boaz's kindness and guides Ruth on a perilous path to a husband. Boaz is kin to Naomi's family and thus could be their kinsman-redeemer. Family and property were very important; if a man died leaving no children, the law stated that the nearest of kin, usually his brother, was obligated to take the man's land and widow as his own to continue the family line. But because Boaz is not the nearest of kin, it was not a request Ruth could make in the normal way. Instead, Naomi sends Ruth to Boaz while he is asleep on the threshing floor; Ruth uncovers his feet and lays down. This is risky business. Uncovering his feet showed utter humility, since the feet were considered unclean. By laying down at his feet, she humbles herself and shows her trust in him to do the right thing.

This was an incredibly corrupt era, and if Boaz were like other men of his time, he could have taken advantage of Ruth and then thrown her away. But he is a man of faith, and he wants to care for Ruth. He becomes her kinsman-redeemer at the risk of his own land and property. He goes to the man who is Naomi's closest kin and has a conversation with him. That man is unwilling to take Ruth as his wife, afraid for his own inheritance. Boaz steps in the gap. They have a child named Obed...the grandfather of David and forefather of Jesus.

As I mentioned before, we don't see God's direct interaction or intervention in this story, but His providence is written throughout the events. This book shows us how God works in the lives of His faithful people. And so I want to look at the faith of each individual involved and see what their faith says to us. There's Naomi, who practices the faith of an evangelist. There's Boaz, who demonstrates his faith through hospitality and risk. Then finally, there's Ruth, the foreigner, the one who shows us true devotion and genuine repentance.

Let's start with Naomi. At first, she looks deeply depressed. Her husband and sons are dead, she's far from home, and her family's property back in Israel was sold. She had nothing in Moab and little in Bethlehem. Naomi means "pleasant," but she feels that God has dealt bitterly with her and calls herself Mara, which means "bitter." Are these the actions of a faithful person?

I would argue they are, and here's why. Naomi is a woman who lives out her faith and trust in God in ways that others can see. Orpah and Ruth are so close to Naomi that Naomi calls them both daughters...not daughters-in-law. She claims them both as if they were her own, and both of them love her dearly. Now I don't know if you've ever heard this before, but guess what? Mothers-in-law are not the most popular people! It's a cliché, but it's true! There are a few universal constants in the world, and one is the problem of getting along with your in-laws! That's why this is so radical. Instead of being viewed as a foreigner, Naomi's the dearest person that Ruth has. Ruth is willing to drop everything she was and is to follow Naomi to Israel. That says a lot about Ruth, and we'll look at her in a minute. But imagine what kind of woman Naomi was that Ruth would claim Naomi's God, the God of Israel, as her own.

Naomi was first and foremost a woman who lived out her faith in God. She didn't have the commands of Jesus or the Apostle Paul, but all she needed were the great commandments from the book of Deuteronomy: love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. We don't have evidence that Naomi taught her husband's wives the way of the LORD, yet the name "Yahweh" is on Ruth's lips as she makes her oath to Naomi. Naomi has lived her life in such a way that God's love has become evidence to her daughter-in-law, and Ruth knows the name of the God by whom she will be delivered.

Judaism has never been an evangelical religion. By that I mean that the Jews never attempted to make Yahweh-worshippers out of the surrounding nations. But the law was always clear that the promises of God were open to anyone who believed in Him and would submit themselves to His law. Naomi lived that out. She didn't ask Ruth to become an Israelite. She showed her what it meant to be a follower of God.

How many of us can say the same thing? How many of us have had a co-worker come up to us and say, "I need to have coffee with you sometime. I want to know what's different about you"? When that happens, we get to share the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. And yet the model for evangelism that Naomi practiced is the one that Peter describes in his first letter, saying, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Ruth and Orpah saw Naomi's life of faith and became like her own daughters. Ruth trusted her to the point of trusting in her God. That's real evangelism.

And let's not forget the end result of Naomi's evangelism. When things were at their darkest, when as an older widow she had no inheritance, no husband, no sons, and no hope, she had her daughter in faith. She had a friend who stuck closer than a brother. We sometimes think that evangelism is a thankless business, one where our friends and family are offended because of our faith, and sometimes that happens. Yet when we share Christ's love as His faithful followers, we will make true friends...and not just for now, but for eternity.

Let's move on to Boaz. He's a man of faith who shows it through his hospitality. It sounds strange to our ears that hospitality can be a devotional trait, but it is. Hospitality is not necessarily what we think it is, though. It's not catering. It's not having a bunch of friends over for a Christmas party. Godly hospitality could include those things, but it goes so much farther.

Godly hospitality is caring for the stranger and treating them like family, welcoming the alien, the poor, and the widow. That's exactly what Boaz shows to Ruth. Does he take a special liking to her? Possibly. Yet from the very start Boaz knows that Ruth is a Moabitess, a people who had often been Israel's adversaries. God's law said that the foreigner was to be welcomed; yet in the era of the judges, the twelve tribes of Israel barely trusted one another, let alone a woman from enemy territory. And while the law said that harvesters were to leave some behind for the poor and hungry, many rejected that law. Farmers might as soon beat the poor as they were to let them pick up the leftovers. Boaz shows he is a man of God not only by letting a foreign woman freely gather grain behind his harvesters, but by making sure she has plenty.

The situation on the threshing floor illustrates not only hospitality but his character. In Hebrew, the sexual connotations are evident. Ruth could have lost everything, including her honor and purity. But Boaz doesn't take advantage of the situation. Instead, he is honored that Ruth would choose him rather than to pursue a younger man. He makes certain she is not shamed in any way and agrees to be her kinsman-redeemer.

That shows the final part of his hospitality: risk. By taking Ruth as his wife, the children he had with her would continue the inheritance line of Ruth's first husband, not his own. It could have jeopardized his own property. This is why the closest of kin refuses to become the kinsman-redeemer; he had too much at stake. He didn't want to risk losing his own property. But Boaz takes that risk – and his name is still remembered in the line of David.

Boaz shows us how faith works hospitality in us. In faith, we do not see racial or ethnic barriers. We do not see rich or poor. We see people created in the image of God. And Boaz gets deeply involved in Ruth's life; he doesn't just give her a token handout, but provides for her liberally, eventually to the point of marriage. How might we practice the same kind of hospitality? How would that stretch us? What would it be like for us to do more than just drop a few coins in the red bucket? What would it mean to give generously, above and beyond your tithe, to the food pantry? What might it mean to adopt a struggling family this Christmas? What might it mean if you adopted them beyond the Christmas season? Maybe you're led to help in other countries, sponsoring a child through Compassion International or World Vision. This season, I invite us to consider how we might show hospitality as Boaz did.

Finally, there's Ruth. Her story shows us her faith through her deep devotion to Naomi, and that faith also provides a unique picture of repentance. Ruth has no logical reason to go with Naomi. The text suggests that Ruth is an attractive young woman who could have easily found a husband. Not only that, but her actions show kindness and thoughtfulness. What more could someone want from a wife? She could have married a rich, handsome Moabite and lived the rest of her days in security and peace amongst her own people, no question.

But that's not what happens. She clings to Naomi. She refuses to go home. She goes as far as to say, "Your God will be my God, and where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried." She could have had any man, she could have chosen the easy road, but she throws her lot completely in with Naomi...Naomi, who has no land, who is too old to remarry, who would have been considered cursed by many Israelites who would have assumed she was being punished by God for something she'd done. As a foreigner, Ruth faces the life of an outsider in Israel, with only the barest hopes for marriage and family and any sort of life at all. But through it all, Ruth shows undying loyalty. She trusts Naomi even when it puts her life and honor at risk in the fields and on the threshing floor, bravely doing what she does not just for herself but for her mother-in-law. At a deeper level, Ruth trusts in God for her protection. She knows the God of Naomi and trusts Him despite losing her husband. That's devotion.

We also see a true picture of repentance in Ruth. We usually think of repentance as a turning from sin, but repentance at its most basic form simply means to turn or to change direction. Ruth does exactly that. She turns away from her people and their savage gods. She doesn't look back. She keeps her gaze on the God of Israel, forsaking the land of her birth, her own mother and father, trusting that Yahweh, the God she now serves, will provide. She does not vacillate, wavering between God and family, God and country, God and security. She puts her trust in God and follows His narrow path despite the risks.

Her path is the hard choice, the best choice, and one for us to emulate. It brings up questions we must answer as well. How devoted are we to God? Perhaps we come each Sunday. Perhaps we participate. As God has worked in our hearts and softened them, maybe we trust Him enough to give a tithe to the church. Maybe we serve others as a way of showing our faith. But how completely have we turned to God? Are we willing to follow wherever He leads? Are we devoted like Ruth? Have we left behind everything, all our sins, to follow God? Have we been willing to set aside family ties and friendships to honor and obey our Lord and Savior? Have we trusted God to the point of risking everything we hold dear? God may have never asked that of you. He may never lead you into the wilderness that Naomi and Ruth experienced. But I encourage us all to resolve today to give our full love and devotion to Jesus Christ, turning from anything that might get in the way of our relationship with Him. That way, when those troubling times do come, you will have the strength to set your gaze firmly on the one who has given His life to save you for eternity.

As we close, I want to tie this story into our celebration of Advent. We remember how Jesus came as a tiny child into our world. We find joy and awe in the story. And yet, how awesome is it that Jesus is our kinsman-redeemer? Just like Boaz to Ruth, God is not our closest of kin; sin separated us from God and made death our nearest relative. We have no claim on God and no right to His salvation. Yet through Jesus Christ, God was willing to redeem us; He paid the price with His own precious blood, overcoming death's claim on us and bringing us to His side. And just as Boaz took Ruth to be his bride, showing his affection and care for her, so too Christ takes the church to be his eternal bride, bestowing on her the riches of His love and grace. As we look back this season to the Christ child in the manger, let us also look forward, to the coming marriage of Christ and his bride, as God reconciles all things and takes His faithful people – faithful people like Ruth and Naomi and Boaz – to be His own, to live by His side and reign with Him forever.