

Women of the Bible – Ruth 1:1-18

What is loyalty?

Chocolate/lots of chocolate

Your football team/ a better one

Barnt Green/New Zealand

Today, we're looking at the story of Ruth – next week we'll carry on with the story, looking at Naomi. This part of the story really is all about making a decision – to quote the song “should I stay or should I go now” (SLIDE 35)

Let's think about what's happening in this story. It starts in the time of the Judges of Israel. This is the time after Moses and Joshua but before the kings of Israel. Elimelek and his wife Naomi decide to leave Bethlehem because of a famine in the land. And so, with their two sons, they move to the next door country of Moab. IT's a classic refugee situation. Life is impossibly hard in your country, so you run to a different place hoping your fortunes pick up.

Now, this short trip seems to have become a longer stay but one marked by tragedy. Elimelek dies leaving behind Naomi and their two sons. The family stays in Moab and the two sons marry Moabite girls – Orpah and Ruth. Then more tragedy strikes and both of Naomi's sons die. Now bear in mind that the life of a woman in ancient times was largely tied to that of her husband and family. Three women, on their own, are incredibly vulnerable. For Naomi, a widow in a foreign land, it must have been awful.

Then one glimmer of hope arises. News reaches Naomi that the famine in Israel is over. With nothing for her in Moab, she sets out to return home. It will be a life of poverty, but at least one in a familiar place. The two daughter's-in-law start to go with her – they are now technically part of Naomi's family now – but Naomi isn't comfortable with this. Yes, they would provide comfort and companionship but if they followed her, what kind of life is she leading them to.

“Go back and start a new life” she tells them. They're faced with a choice but neither are easy routes.

“If I go, there will be trouble” (SLIDE 36)

Going back to their families in Moab is largely the easier option. They have a chance to marry again, to be close to their natural family, a new start. There may be an element of stigma about their status as widows, they may be considered second class, but there is a chance to rebuild

“And if I stay, it will be double” (SLIDE 37)

Sticking with Naomi is harder. Naomi uses the line “Am I going to have more sons who could become your husbands?” The tradition was that if a man died and left a widow, it was one of his brothers responsibilities to marry the widow so that she could be cared for and so that the dead brothers name could carry on. Naomi is too old to marry and certainly also too old to have more sons to replace the ones who are gone. Following Naomi just leads to poverty.

“So, come on and let me know - should I stay or should I go?” (SLIDE 38)

The two girls reach different conclusions - Orpah goes home but Ruth doesn't. And despite Naomi's pleading, Ruth is not for turning. Ruth is loyal to Naomi.

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.” When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

That is an incredible statement. Ruth would have known the cost of this decision and yet she places loyalty to Naomi above her own circumstances. She is loyal to Naomi and she is also loyal to this new God that has entered her life by marrying one of Naomi's sons. And if you look carefully, you see that she uses the covenant name of God, “Lord”, “Yahweh”.

This is the God, who, himself makes promises.

1 Chronicles 28:20 “I will never leave you nor forsake you”

Matthew 28:20 “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”

John 8:12 “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

When we look at Ruth, we see a reflection of one of the key characteristics of God – his loyalty. Whatever we get up to in this life, God doesn't ever say “enough is enough”. He doesn't give up on us. He doesn't cast us out as being not good enough. Instead, he is loyal to us. And his loyalty for him is costly. The price he pays for sticking with us is the cross.

And, of course, we are then called to mirror that loyalty.

So, think about your own life. How is loyalty seen in your life? Are you loyal to the God who has given you everything and then done everything for you? Much like Ruth, that loyalty can seem very costly, it can seem like an impossible task. But, he who is faithful and just will lead us to new things and will bless our faithfulness to him.

If you don't know the story of Ruth, we finish it next week, but be reassured that Ruth is blessed for her loyalty. And we will be for ours as well.