

FAITHFULNESS
RUTH 12/3/95
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Good morning! My name is Naomi, Elimilech's wife.
I grew up in Bethlehem, Judah - that's a small town just South of Jerusalem,
for those of you who don't know my country well.

I'm here this morning because I'd like to tell you about a young friend of
mine - a woman named Ruth.

Her story is told in full in the Scriptures - in fact you'll probably want to
look at it even as I tell you about her this morning.

I don't intend to tell you the whole story - you probably know it anyway - but I
do want to tell you what Ruth taught me about faithfulness.

Faithfulness. I suppose in your culture as in ours, faithfulness is in
short supply.

It seems that too many people live life for what they can get out
of it rather than what they can invest in it.

I get the feeling that even many marriages are ones of
convenience - People only feel good about their marriage and
desire to remain in it so long as it is meeting their needs.

Actually, your word "faithfulness" is only a partial translation of the word that
I have in mind.

The word in my language is "hesed" - not "blessed" but "h" - "hesed".

There are actually several English words that begin to get at what this
Hebrew word means:

Undeserved favor - like grace,

Loyal love,

Maybe the word "Kindness" comes close - and no, not motivated by
some sense of pity but motivated by genuine love.

"A loyal, loving, kindness - Faithfulness to another person!"

Well, back to my story - I said I want to tell you about Ruth and her
faithfulness - loyal, loving kindness to me.

More than 15 years ago, my husband, my two sons and I moved away from Bethlehem to the neighboring country of Moab.

There was a famine in our country and we knew we had to do something or we'd literally starve.

It wasn't long after we moved that my husband died.

If I thought things had been bad before, I was desperate then.

Fortunately my two sons were able to work, as was I, and we made ends meet.

Things began to look better when they both got married.

That's where Ruth comes in - my son Mahlon married her.

Both my daughters-in-law are excellent women but as I came to find out, there was something special about Ruth.

I said I was desperate when my husband died - but I must tell you I thought my world would come to an end when just ten years later both of my married sons died.

By that time I had heard that the famine was over in Judah and realizing there was nothing holding me in Moab - I made plans to go home.

Well, Ruth and Orpah, that's my other daughter-in-law, both said they wanted to go with me.

I felt that was very thoughtful of them but I assumed that once we got under way they'd realize they needed to stay in their own country.

And when the day came that I left - I told them both how much I loved them and then I asked a blessing on them.

That's the first time I used that word "hesed" - loyal kind faithfulness - that I told you about earlier.

I asked God to show them "hesed"-kindness just like they had shown to me and to their husbands.

Well, I don't think I really understood what that word meant until I experienced what Ruth did next.

I told them how illogical it was for them to go with me and I also told them rather frankly that I was what you might call "bad luck".

Orpah, that's my other daughter-in-law, did what I expected and hoped they would both do - she kissed me good-bye and went back to her parent's home.

But Ruth, and here's the surprising part,- though I begged her, Ruth wouldn't leave.

And with the words she spoke next I learned something about "faithfulness" - about loyal kindness.

I learned that loving faithfulness, loyal kindness, is a DECISION!

I'll never forget her words: "Where you go I will go and where you stay I will stay."

What struck me was this was not just a decision to go to Judah but this was a decision of commitment to ME.

And I realized how serious she was when she invited God's curse on herself if she ever left me.

This woman had thought it through.

And she had not only made a decision in her own mind but she declared it openly.

By declaring it and putting her relationship with God on the line there was no turning back.

That's where faithfulness starts - whether it is with God or with a spouse or with a friend - loyalty begins with a decision and a declaration.

I choose to treat you this way from this day forward.

I was also struck with something else that day - this decision and declaration grew out love.

I don't think I had ever before felt so loved as I did that day.

Just like God's love is unearned so I felt Ruth's love that day was

unearned -

There was no way I had deserved this - it was just raw love - a choice to love me.

I want to love like that!

I want to have that kind of loyal kindness - faithfulness to others.

When I realized Ruth was determined to go with me I stopped urging her to go home.

And even though I thoroughly appreciated her love and commitment to me, I wondered what kind of a burden on me this young woman would be..

Now I had to not only worry about me but about her.

But again, Ruth had something to teach me about faithfulness.

No sooner had we gotten back to Bethlehem then Ruth asked if she could go to the fields and pick up the grain that had been left over.

In our country when they cut down the grain they are supposed to leave some of the corners of the field and not take every stalk of grain but leave some of it for poor people to come and pick up to feed themselves.

We call it "gleaning" - picking up the leftovers in the field and it is hard work.

I'm no "spring chicken" and frankly that kind of work would have killed me.

BUT RUTH WENT FOR ME.

Faithfulness is not only a decision and a declaration **BUT** it is also **HARD WORK.**

When Ruth made the commitment to love me and be loyal to me, it meant "no matter what".

I learned that faithfulness is not just "talk" but is love in action.

That woman worked hard not just one day but every day and she did it for me.

I want to love like that. I want to love God and others that way.

Ruth's faithfulness not only involved a decision and hard work but it also involved risk.

I don't know if you've thought about it or not but even the fact that she left Moab and came back to Judah with me was a great risk for Ruth.

Anyone could see that tragedy and suffering followed me wherever I went.

Famine in my native country, death in my adopted country - why would anyone risk staying with me. - but Ruth was willing because she was faithful.

Not only that but imagine a foreigner, especially a Moabitess, going into the fields to pick grain.

Not many people in those days were concerned about the rights of foreigners.

I was truthfully afraid she would be verbally if not physically abused - but Ruth was willing to risk herself because of her faithfulness to me.

I want to love like that.

I want to love God and others that way.

You probably already know that the field Ruth gleaned in that first day, unbeknownst to us, was owned by a distant relative named Boaz.

Ruth met Boaz that day

From what Ruth told me, he clearly took an interest in her.

And as the days of harvest went on I began to have an interest in him.

Did I mention that Boaz was a distant relative?

That may not mean much to you but in my country, a male relative could make all the difference in the world.

Both my husband and my sons were dead which meant that I had no one to pass the family property down to and no one to carry the family name along.

As poor as we were and as old as I was, we were forced to sell the little property we had and with my death would end the family of Elimilech.

What happened next taught me a huge lesson about faithfulness.

I thought up a plan about how I could get Ruth and Boaz together - you know, Get Boaz to marry Ruth.

Sure I was concerned for Ruth that she have a home but candidly I was just as concerned about me and my dead husband's property and name.

So I made up this plan for Ruth to propose marriage to Boaz.

Well when she showed up at his place of work in the middle of the night and proposed to him, he said something that made me realize another dimension of faithfulness.

Faithfulness involves sacrifice.

Here's what Boaz said to Ruth:

"The Lord bless you. This kindness (there's that word "hesed" faithfulness - loyal loving kindness) This kindness you show for your mother-in-law is greater than that which you showed earlier by coming here with her: You have not run after younger men, whether rich or poor."

I'd missed it!

Sure Boaz had money and security but he was a lot older than she was.

Like any young woman Ruth surely must have had dreams about marrying a man more her own age - a man more attractive.

But Boaz hit it right on the head - Ruth didn't have herself primarily in mind - she had ME on her heart.

By marrying Boaz it was not her family name that would be carried on, it was not her family property that would be protected but MINE.

I then remembered the words she said to me before we ever came back to Judah:

"Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. And

where you will die I will die and there I will be buried."

That young woman, there that day, sacrificed her own future for mine. She gave up her family for mine, she gave up her gods for mine -
My family and my God became hers.

Ruth had committed herself to me!

I want to love God and others like that!

One last thing Ruth taught me about "faithfulness".
She taught me the REWARDS OF FAITHFULNESS.

Back before the famine when my husband, sons and I were still living in Judah I think my concept of God was pretty shallow.
Everything in my life was good.
I just assumed that God is good - after all look how things are going for me and my family.

I had a pretty naive faith - one that was untested by much life.

But when the famine hit and my husband and sons died - I was a different woman.
Oh, I still believed in God but I think I pretty much thought of the providence of God as having to do only with those terrible things that happen in life that God is somehow still controlling to his desired ends.

I'm afraid the joy was gone out of my life.
Or maybe that I connected joy too closely with smooth sailing.

In any case when things fell apart I found myself not only feeling miserable but acting miserably.

Any faith I still had I thought of as just coping.
I saw my relationship to God as largely one of hanging on.

I was tempted to think of life as just one long hard experience and then you die.

I was tempted to think of faith as just accepting the bad things that happen.

I got to the place where I wasn't even expecting God's providence to include what was pleasant and enjoyable.

I'm afraid that I thought of anyone who talked about joy in life as nothing more than naive - they just haven't been there yet - they'll learn.

But Ruth lived through the death of a husband AND she still faced the future with anticipation - she still expected God to bless.

She faced each day, eager to live it, anticipating the joy of the Lord.

What my experience with Ruth has taught me is that God rewards faithfulness.

God's providence is not only hidden behind the clouds of suffering but his providence also shines through into much of life here and now.

Yes, it is true that God's Kingdom will come in its fullness, unclouded by sin and tragedy but we can know much of the joy of the Lord now.

God rewards faithfulness.

I'm not talking about "health and wealth" but I am talking about recognizing and receiving from the hand of the Lord all the good and perfect gifts which he bestows on us every day.

Back when we were still in Moab I prayed that God would show his kindness to Ruth by giving her a home.

When Boaz first met Ruth, he was so impressed with her commitment to me - her faithfulness, her loyal kindness that he prayed that God would reward her.

And I think you all know that is exactly what God did.

My Ruth was given a home - she was married to Boaz.

My Ruth was enabled by God to conceive and she had a baby boy.

And God has given to me a son - a child who will carry the family name, a child who will inherit the family property , a child who will care for me in my old age.

God is Good!

I want a relationship with my God that is like that - a relationship that ACCEPTS the pain that he allows into my life but a relationship that also EXPECTS, and never ceases to look for the joys of life that God so freely gives every day.

I don't want to succumb to a life of joyless perseverance - only hanging on until Jesus comes - I want to develop a life of joyful expectation and enjoyment of the goodness of God today.

"Hesed", faithfulness, loyal loving kindness to others is what Ruth taught me.

A loyal kindness, a faithfulness that is costly, risky, and hard work but is rewarded by our God.

I want to be that kind of person!

Ruth taught me that.