

Faith Heroes: Lessons to Help You Face Crisis | RUTH

Keegan Kalideen | July 24, 2022

PRELUDE

How deeply is your everyday story nested within God's eternal story?
How truly is your ordinary life hidden within God's extraordinary love?

As we explore these biblical heroes of faith and the lessons we can learn from their times of crisis, we've visited the lives of the most notable and memorable figures in Scripture:
Abraham, Moses, David, and Elijah.

But in the book of Ruth, the supernatural and the miraculous are subtly submerged within a short story that reads more like an ordinary day in the life of...any one of us here in this room.

We'll look at this narrative in two distinct parts, and draw out 4 key lessons along the way.

So as we dive into Ruth's story, and seek to understand her journey of faith through crisis, I want to encourage you to put yourself in the shoes of these characters.

Maybe one of these shoes fits you better than the others.

But as you listen, reflect on how your story intersects with theirs.

And ultimately consider how your story fits within God's story.

You ready? Let's go.

PART I: THE BITTERNESS OF LOSS

April 28th, 2015.

5:38 A.M.

Sick, tired, and in pain.

Laying on a bed at Markham Stouffville Hospital,
I penned these words to God:

“Humiliated, helpless, naked;
A wreck I’ve become,
what have You done to me?”

Two weeks earlier I had been diagnosed with Chron’s & Colitis,
an intestinal autoimmune disease,
One week earlier, I was hospitalized;
They put me on prednisone and I began to recover,
only to suddenly relapse into a worse state,
losing 30 pounds in under 2 weeks.

When I wrote these lyrics, I was in such pain, and had be changed by a
nurse.

It was as if I was an infant again.

I had nothing. I could do nothing.

Just lay in a bed, in excruciating pain, wondering if I would die soon.

“God, why would you do this?

I’m 22 years old, and am supposed to have a full life ahead of me.

Now you’ve stripped me of everything and have brought me out here to die.

I don’t understand.

What kind of Father are you?”

Can *you* relate to this?

Have *you* ever experienced pain or loss?

Do you feel hopeless and confused?

Or maybe you’re bitter towards God?

Maybe your circumstances have changed drastically, and have forced you to
transition into a season of uncertainty and instability.

Maybe you had to move, or change jobs, or schools. Maybe you're worried that you'll never be able to afford a house, or find a spouse, or have children.

Maybe you've lost or are currently losing a loved one, and you're asking God, "why?"

Or maybe the loss you're experiencing is not in your environment or relationships, but in your heart.

A loss of passion, a loss of purpose, a loss of hope; a loss of faith in God's goodness, and maybe even in his existence.

In the opening chapter of the book of Ruth, the story centers around an Israelite woman named Naomi who seems to have her life together. She has a respected husband, two sons and she's well regarded in her hometown of Bethlehem. But verse 1 ominously sets the stage for what follows in Naomi's life, **"In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land..."**

(Ruth 1:1). During this economic crisis, Naomi's husband, Elimelech, takes his family and leaves Bethlehem. They travel across the Jordan River, around the Dead Sea, and settle in the country of Moab, a national enemy of Israel. So now, Naomi's family is trying to recover from a famine while living in foreign, enemy territory. What more could go wrong?

Well we're not told how, but by some circumstance or condition, Naomi's husband dies, leaving her alone, in a foreign country, recovering from a financial blow, with two sons to take care of.

Both of her sons eventually marry Moabite women; women from an enemy tribe, culture and religion. And if that's not enough, ten years go by and her sons also die, with no children to carry on their line or legacy.

Naomi lost everything.

Her home, her possessions, her husband, her two sons,

And is now left with two foreign daughter-in-laws to take care of in a strange land.

After hearing that the Lord had provided food in Bethlehem, Naomi would eventually return to her homeland, but with greater grief and loss than when

she left. Imagine now, as her friends and family greet her after more than ten years of being away.

“Is this Naomi?” (Ruth 1:19).

Their question contains a bitter irony, as Naomi’s name actually means “pleasant”.

“Is this the Naomi that was once so pleasant, constantly posting snaps and moments of her picture perfect family life, now returning, ten years later, with no husband, no children, no security, and no future?”

You’d think at this point that the biblical author would interject with some turning point of faith;

But no. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the author continues with Naomi’s honest, frustrated response.

“Don’t call me [pleasant]; call me [bitter] for the “Almighty” has dealt me a bitter hand.

I had everything before I left, and God brought me back with nothing.

Why call me Naomi? When God’s hand is clearly against me and *He* has ruined my life.”

Can you relate to this?

I mean, are we even allowed to talk like this about God?

Let alone in church?

But I’m so glad God included this in the Scriptures, along with countless other passages which express these raw, honest human feelings and experiences. In biblical literature, this kind of expression is a form of lament called “complaint”.

The fact that God’s inspired Word contains this kind of language *against* God is evidence that God is *not* scared of your questions or your doubts.

And God does *not* ignore your anger and bitterness toward Him.

He invites it. And He invites *you*, in your full range of human emotion and experience, into His presence. The good, the bad, and the ugly.

I'd encourage you, sometime this week, today, right now even, to be honest with God.

Whether it's screaming to the heavens or sitting still in a silent rage; share your raw, uncut feelings with God in prayer.

Anger. Shame. Guilt. Rage. Bitterness. Hatred.

God invites and includes *all* of you into His story.

On our website, we've put together a **7-Day Lament Prayer Exercise** that you can access by going to **cornerstonechurch.ca/lament**. I'd really encourage you to use this as a guide this week for personal reflection on these real emotions that we don't often open up about.

And this is our first lesson from the book of Ruth: **Don't let your story of tragedy end in bitterness. When you invite God into those dark places of loss and emptiness, God invites you into His story of redemption and restoration.**

7 years ago, on that hospital bed at Markham Stouffville Hospital, those same words that began as a bitter accusation against God slowly turned into a prayer of lament, as I reflected more and more on the character of God, beyond my present pain and suffering: my song of bitterness turned into a psalm of God's faithfulness, as I invited God into the darkest places of my heart.

And little did Naomi know that her *empty* cup would soon be overflowing, and her *bitterness* would turn to rejoicing.

Which brings us to **PART II: THE REDEMPTION OF LOVE**

Now I know what you're thinking: isn't this supposed to be a story about Ruth and the heroic lesson of faith from her crisis?

Well that's what's strange about the story of Ruth.

Although this biblical book bears her name, her place and role in the story seems strangely small in comparison to Naomi's crisis and Boaz's kindness.

In fact, if you were reading through the Bible, it's quite easy to miss the book

of Ruth, which is comprised of 4 chapters that read like an idyllic, rural folk story tucked between two action-packed thrillers: the book of Judges and the books of 1st & 2nd Samuel. Ruth's name occurs 12 times in *this* book, but only appears *once* in the rest of the Bible. And although God is mentioned numerous times by the characters, there are only two passing references to His direct involvement in the entire book.

So why is Ruth regarded as such a significant biblical character?

And what lessons can we learn from her heroic faith in times of crisis?

Well, Ruth is one of Naomi's daughter-in-laws. And unlike Naomi, we know nothing about Ruth except the unattractive fact that *she* is a Moabite.

Although Israelites were not formally prohibited from marrying Moabites, it was certainly discouraged because of their history as an enemy nation and also because they worshiped pagan gods.

After Naomi's crushing losses, and right before she headed back to her hometown of Bethlehem, she pleads with her two daughter-in-laws to return home to their families. She knew that if these young women returned with her, they would have little to no chance of surviving in Israelite society. They were widows, childless, *and* foreigners; which was a recipe for a life of poverty and hardship. One of her daughters agreed, saying farewell to her mother-in-law and returning to her family.

But Ruth, knowing full well the consequences of returning to Bethlehem with Naomi, responds to her mother in law with these iconic words of undying loyalty:

“Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” (Ruth 1:16-18)

And with those words, this obscure Moabite widow was suddenly weaved into the cosmic tapestry of Yahweh's covenantal love and redemptive

purposes for all of creation. We're not told *why* she uttered those words, or how aware she was of Jewish history and religion, but from this point onward in the story, it becomes increasingly clear that this girl knew God.

Ruth would have experienced much of the same loss as Naomi; leaving her family to marry into the family of a foreign nation, married ten years without bearing a child, and finally losing her husband. Ruth had every reason to believe the last ten years of her life were meaningless. Maybe *she* was meaningless.

But the author mentions no bitterness in Ruth.
No hint of complaint or grumbling.

Ruth remains faithful.

What unfolds in the following scenes of this historical drama have been regarded by commentators as some of the richest artistry in all of biblical literature. Ruth's timeless words, accompanied by her selfless actions, create a ripple effect of lovingkindness that would influence generations to come while simultaneously positioning her ordinary life within the master plan of God's providence.

This leads to our second lesson from the book of Ruth: **Your Story Matters.**
Alot.

No matter how seemingly small or insignificant. Don't let the stories of others or your own idealistic vision blind you from recognizing how uniquely and distinctly God has designed your story to fit within His story. That's one lesson I'm learning every day: that God's story is *much* bigger than mine, and He's writing a *much* better story than I ever could.

At this point in the narrative, I'd like to introduce the most important strand that lines the entire book of Ruth like a scarlet thread.

Hesed. No, I'm not clearing my throat or getting ready to spit.

Hesed is a Hebrew word that's difficult to translate directly into any single English word, but it's frequently used to describe the character of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Hesed is kinda like God's personal infinity gauntlet, combining various virtues such as kindness, compassion, loyalty, generosity and patience into one seamless expression of His loving heart.

And although God's explicit action is rarely mentioned in the book of Ruth, every single gesture and sentiment of loving commitment or generosity is a literary wink by the author, hinting to the reader that God is indeed *very* present and *relentlessly* active through the *Hesed* of the characters in this story.

Say it with me: Hesed, Hesed, Hesed.

Now it won't leave your mind, or your throat.

But that's precisely the literary effect that *Hesed* carries throughout this narrative. God often conceals Himself in the everyday fabric of human affairs in order to more tangibly reveal Himself through our senses to our soul. The story of Ruth is a shining example of how human kindness embodies and reveals God's kindness in the most personal way.

This brings us to lesson #3 from the story of Ruth: **Don't ever underestimate the seismic impact of your simple, ordinary, everyday actions and words.**

Whether through a random act of kindness, an encouraging word to a friend, or a lifelong commitment of loyalty and sacrifice toward a loved one; when you embody *Hesed*, you become a guaranteed conduit of God's infinite love to those around you.

In chapter 2, Naomi & Ruth return to Bethlehem right before the wheat harvest, and Ruth wastes no time getting to work. As she was busy gathering wheat in the fields, the author subtly notes that this is no coincidence. Ruth just so "happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz", who *just so happens* to be "a worthy man", which means that he is of noble character and would protect her from harm. Boaz also *just so happens* to be related to her deceased father-in-law, Elimelech.

Keep in mind that Ruth has no clue who Boaz is; for all she knows, he might just be another greedy landowner who will take advantage of her.

But Boaz took special notice of Ruth as she collected in the fields, *especially* since he had heard of Ruth's kindness to Naomi. So not only does he abide by the sociocultural customs to allow Ruth to glean freely in his field, he gives specific instructions to his workers to ensure her safety, generously allows her to drink from the water fountain reserved for his workers,

invites her to share in a feast until she was satisfied *and* had leftovers to take home in tupperware,

and *then*, he instructed his workers to set aside some bundles of the good harvest for Ruth to gather.

Boaz showed unprecedented generosity to this foreign, impoverished widow who he had *just* met.

Ruth was shocked. How...why...what would compel a man of Boaz's status and wealth to show such unconditional kindness to her, when she had nothing to offer him and he had no guarantee that she would even return.

After working late into the evening, Ruth returns to Naomi, with her tupperware container and her harvest, and begins to tell her mother-in-law about the excessive kindness of Boaz to her that day.

When Naomi finds this out, she freaks! Because *this* could be a critical turning point for their future.

Naomi, and Ruth by proxy, had no hope for a future family or even their own survival; they were destined to be homeless widows for life, constantly under threat of assault or extortion. *Except* for one legal provision in Jewish law which allowed a close relative of a widowed woman to buy back the family estate *and* marry the widow in order to continue their deceased relative's legacy and lineage forward. This may seem like a primitive solution to our modern ears, but to ancient Jewish readers, this was a brilliant and revolutionary strategy for restoring the dignity and security of a grieving woman who would have otherwise been de-humanized in the ancient world. The family relative who was both suitable and willing to bear this

socio-economic burden was referred to as the *kinsman-redeemer*. A member of their *kin* who would sacrificially *redeem* this widow's land, life, and lineage. This is where we get the words "redeemer" and "redemption" from.

So in chapter 3, Naomi desperately attempts to seize what may be their last and only chance at survival by plotting out a plan for Ruth to claim Boaz as her kinsman-redeemer. But this plan would risk everything, for both Ruth & Boaz, potentially ruining both their lives in scandal.

But Ruth remains faithful.

She's made a promise to Naomi, and will stay loyal to her, no matter the cost. Following Naomi instructions, Ruth boldly approaches Boaz in the middle of the night, and what seems like a seductive scene of forbidden romance turns out to be a desperate plea for Boaz to become her redeemer.

Boaz is *floored* at her courageous willingness to sacrifice everything for the sake of her mother in law. She could have pursued *any* other man for marriage, conveniently saving herself and her future. But instead, Ruth demonstrated even greater *Hesed* towards Naomi in this act than she did previously.

So Boaz, knowing full well the heavy socio-economic cost of redemption, performs the culminating act of *Hesed* by marrying Ruth, saving their estate, and carrying on the family line.

Naomi, whose life seemed hopeless and whose legacy was lost, was restored into greater fullness than she could have ever imagined possible. This foreign daughter-in-law of hers exhibited such *Hesed*, that those same women who greeted her upon her bitter return from Moab, now rejoiced with her that Ruth's love toward her was worth more than if she had *had* seven sons. Naomi, after what seemed like a lifetime of grief and sorrows, was redeemed, secure, and full of life as she held her newborn grandson. The final section of the book of Ruth concludes with a genealogy that links Ruth & Boaz's great great great great grandfather, to their great grandson, king David. This family link becomes the perfect linchpin that connects the

chaotic anarchy of the book of Judges to the dynasty of the king after God's own heart in the books of 1st & 2nd Samuel.

I also mentioned that Ruth's name is only mentioned one other time in the Bible outside of this book. A thousand years later, a former tax collector named Matthew, in the first chapter of his written Gospel, includes Ruth alongside Boaz as a critical ancestress in the genealogy of Jesus Christ the Messiah. God's *Hesed*, fully and truly embodied in human flesh, who would not only come to save and redeem the people of Israel, but to restore and renew the entire world to exist and abound in perfect *Hesed* toward one another and God.

Sandra Richter makes the analogy crystal clear:

“Can you hear the metaphor of Scripture? Yahweh is presenting himself as the patriarch of the clan who has announced his intent to redeem his lost family members. Not only has he agreed to pay whatever ransom is required, but he has sent the most cherished member of his household to accomplish his intent, his only, beloved, firstborn Son. Not only is this firstborn coming to seek and save the lost, but he is coming to share his inheritance with sinners who have squandered everything they have been given.

God is beyond human gender and our relationship to him beyond blood, but the tale of redemptive history comes to us in the language of a patriarchal society:

Father God is buying back his lost children by sending his eldest son, his heir, to give His life as a ransom for many, so that we the alienated might be adopted as sons and daughters to share forever in His inheritance.”

Jesus is the climax of God's plan to redeem humanity. Both the scarlet thread of *Hesed*, and this unique strand of redemption, are both masterfully woven through the fabric of Scripture to create a divine tapestry which reveal God's lovingkindness, through the unmerited grace of Jesus on the cross, poured *into* our hearts by the Holy Spirit to flow *out* of our hearts into fresh, daily expressions of *Hesed*. So, how can you spread God's love this week through everyday acts of kindness?

Ruth had every reason to be bitter like Naomi; she faced both tragic loss *and* a hopeless future. But instead of letting bitterness take root in her heart, she demonstrated a resilient faith in God's faithfulness through her courageous loyalty to Naomi. Not only did God redeem and restore her circumstances, but her short, little story became a pivotal turning point in God's redemptive story. Ruth's ordinary life reflected God's extraordinary love, and paved the way for Jesus, our eternal Redeemer.

As the worship team makes their way up, I want to encourage you with one final lesson:

No matter the crisis, loss, or difficulty you may be facing today, open up your heart to receive God's unmerited, unconditional, unimaginable gift of love for you.

The real plot twist in this story is the uncanny similarity between the *hesed* of Boaz & the love of Jesus.

Ruth "just so happened" to end up in the field of Boaz, who "just so happened" to be of noble character and a close relative suitable to become their kinsman-redeemer. That sounds a lot like the sovereign pull of the Spirit of God drawing us throughout our life toward Christ.

Boaz took special notice of Ruth, giving her special protection, privileges and an abundance of provision beyond what was ever required or anticipated. This mirrors the boundless generosity of Jesus as he welcomes us into His family, satisfies us with His abundant mercies, richly lavishes upon us His grace, and sends us forth with the prosperity of His presence.

Ruth pursued Boaz with a courageous desperation that was willing to lose everything: a radical faith in her redeemer. Her faith amazed him, and he embraced her as his bride. And as they consummated their union, not only did it bring about redemption and restoration to what was once lost and empty, but it turns out to have been a pivotal part of God's providential plan all along.

When we desperately pursue Christ with a courageous faith that is willing to lose everything to gain Him, we gain EVERYTHING. The eternal embrace of

Jesus redeems and restores every facet of our lives, and loving union with Christ is sweeter than all the world's riches and pleasure combined. And when you freely embrace Jesus, accepting His open invitation, you instantly enter the paradox of God's providential plot twist, that you were actually His all along.

And if you don't know Jesus today, I'd encourage you to let your prayer become like Ruth's prayer.

Let's pray this together.

“Jesus, I will follow you unto death.

Where you go, I will go; and where you stay, I will stay.

You will be my Lord, and your Church will be my family.

Spread your wings over me, and redeem me as your own.

I offer you my emptiness and receive your fullness today.

Fill me now with your *Hesed*; your merciful kindness, and steadfast and compassion,

That I might extend that same love to those around me.

Amen.”

BENEDICTION

So just to recap the 4 lessons we learned from the book of Ruth:

Lesson #1: Don't let your story end in bitterness.

Lesson #2: Your story matters. A lot.

Lesson #3: Don't underestimate everyday acts of lovingkindness.

Lesson #4: Receive God's unconditional love for you, today.

So if you can just lift your hands upward and receive this benediction as a gift:

May the God of Ruth the Moabite,
redeem and restore your life in Jesus,
flood your heart with His infinite love,

and extend that love to others through everyday expressions of *Hesed*.
Amen.