**A Loyal-Love**

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In the day before there was e-mail or texting, a young man wrote a letter to his beloved:[[1]](#footnote-1)

*My dear Laura,*

*I would climb the highest mountain to see your face, swim the widest river for your touch, cross the burning desert for your kiss.*

*With everlasting love,*

*Bill*

*P.S. I will see you on Saturday – if it doesn’t rain.*

Are we fair-weather lovers?

One of the qualities of God that the Bible highlights is His loyal-love. The Hebrew word is *chesed*. It is often translated as “lovingkindess” but is best understood as “loyal-love”. It is the great word at the center of God’s covenant relationship with His people. For example, Deut 7:9 connects God’s keeping of His covenant with His loyal-love. Nelson Glueck concludes in his classic study of the word that *chesed* can be rendered by “loyalty,” “mutual aid” or “reciprocal love”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Katherine Sakenfeld updates his study and summarizes the meaning of the word as “a responsible keeping of faith with another with whom one is in a relationship.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Their studies show that *chesed* can represent human conduct and divine conduct.

The Book of Ruth in the Old Testament showcases believers who emulate God’s loyal-love by living in loyal-love. Two major characters who demonstrate loyal-love are Ruth and Boaz.

Ruth provides a pleasing picture of loyal-love. The writer stresses her devotion and dedication by her statement, her acts, and her commendation by other characters.

Ruth makes an extraordinary statement of personal, national, and spiritual identification with Naomi in 1:16-17. Both the context and the structure of the statement stress the great loyalty of Ruth. The context relates Naomi’s attempts to dissuade Ruth and Orpah, her two widowed daughters-in law, from following her back to Bethlehem. Her arguments make use of personal, national, and spiritual motives. She manages to persuade Orpah but she fails to convince Ruth. Orpah is not portrayed negatively but only serves to stress the extraordinary commitment of Ruth. The structure of Ruth’s statement centers on her identification with the nationality and faith of Naomi and ends with an oath which indicates that Yahweh is her God.[[4]](#footnote-4) Ruth’s words accentuate her loyalty and self-renouncing faithfulness to the person, nation, and God of Naomi.

Ruth demonstrates loyal-love through her acts. In chapter one she clings to Naomi and returns with her to Bethlehem. She is more committed to her mother-in-law than to her own needs and to social custom. In chapter two she takes the initiative to provide for Naomi and herself by gleaning in the fields. She goes with the approval of Naomi, performs her work diligently, shows deference to Boaz, graciously accepts his favor, brings home the fruits of her labor and the leftovers of her meal, reports to Naomi, and accepts her advice. She shows herself to be loyal, diligent, and humble. In chapter three she carries out without question the instructions of Naomi concerning claiming Boaz as a kinsman-redeemer. Ruth is a model of loyal-love.

Several of the other characters commend Ruth for her loyal-love. In 1:8 Naomi prays for her because she practiced loyal-love with her husband and with her. In 2:11-12 Boaz prays for her because of the kindness she showed to Naomi. In 3:10-11 he pledges to redeem her because of the loyal-love she showed in choosing him over other men and because all the people of the town knew her to be a woman of noble character. In 4:14 a chorus of women praises her and counts her of more worth than the ideal number of sons. These affirmations of Ruth’s character and conduct ratify the fact that she is an embodiment of what constitutes living in loyal-love.

Boaz, like Ruth, demonstrates loyal-love. He fulfills the letter and the spirit of the law. The narrator introduces him as a man of noble character (2:1). His observance of the law, his kindness to Ruth, his adherence to proper procedure, and his willingness to redeem Elimelech’s land and acquire Ruth as his wife validate this description.

Boaz obeys the law of God during a period of general neglect and disobedience in the days when the judges governed. He appears as a model employer greeting his laborers in the name of Yahweh and treating them gently and respectfully (2:4). He allows the poor to glean in his fields in fulfillment of Lev 23:22. He is kind to strangers (2:14).

Boaz exceeds the demands of the law and displays extraordinary kindness. He lets Ruth glean freely in his field in accordance with the law but then adds his protection and provision. He shares his meal with her (2:14) and issues commands for her safety and abundant success in gleaning (2:15-16).

Boaz shows his righteous and responsible character in his adherence to proper procedure. He pledges to redeem Ruth only if a nearer kinsman fails to do so (3:12-13). He will not usurp another man’s right to act responsibly.

Boaz’ willingness to redeem the field of Elimelech and acquire Ruth as his wife stands in contrast to the attitude of the nearer kinsman who was willing to redeem the field but shunned his responsibility to acquire Ruth as a wife. As in the case of Orpah, this unnamed kinsman functions as a foil to emphasize the greater loyalty of Boaz. Boaz goes on to legally settle the matter of redeeming the field of Elimelech and acquiring Ruth as his wife to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance (4:9-10).

Both Boaz and Ruth exemplify the qualities of loyal-love. God brings them together to become the ancestors of David (4:13-17) and ultimately Jesus the Messiah (Mat 1:1-6).

The loyal-love of believers provides a basis for the blessing of God. The story of Ruth emphasizes that divine blessing follows human faithfulness. This is expressed through the prayers of blessing for Ruth by Naomi and Boaz (1:8-9; 2:12; 3:10), through the prayer of blessing for Boaz by Naomi (2:20), and through the prayer of blessing for Boaz and Ruth by the people of Bethlehem (4:11-12).

Naomi puts forward the past loyalty of Orpah and Ruth as the basis for invoking the loyal-love of Yahweh (1:8-9). She prays specifically that they find security in marriage. There is a clear connection between their kind deeds in the past and her supplication that Yahweh should reward their deeds in the future.

Boaz invokes Yahweh’s blessing on Ruth after he recapitulates her record of loyalty to Naomi (2:11-12). He prays that Yahweh recompense her because her kind acts and her identification of herself with Naomi evidence the fact that she has placed herself under the protection of the God of Israel.

The other blessings follow the same pattern of fidelity and reward. Naomi blesses Boaz on account of his kind deeds to Ruth (2:20). Boaz blesses Ruth a second time when she performs another act of loyal-love in choosing him as a kinsman-redeemer. The people of Bethlehem who have witnessed Boaz’ act of family loyalty in marrying Ruth ask that his house be blessed as a reward for such fidelity (4:11-12). The loyal acts of individuals form the basis for a supplication that Yahweh should bless them.

It’s important to note that this pattern of fidelity and reward is not a mechanical doctrine. It is a confident affirmation that God’s blessing should follow living in loyal-love. The words of blessing are prayers and not statement of doctrine. The inexplicable tragedies of famine and death in the story indicate that there is nothing automatic about the blessing of God. The point is that God’s people can be confident that He will turn death into life and complaint into praise as they live in loyal-love before Him. The Book of Ruth shows that when a person commits himself to this kind of life God will act behind the scenes to direct him. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in his favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance.

A modern example of loyal-love is Robertson McQuilkin, president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary. His wife, Muriel, was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease.  In an interview with *Christianity Today* McQuilkin revealed that he was torn between two commitments, caring for his wife and being president of the college and seminary.[[5]](#footnote-5) As Muriel needed more and more of him, he wrestled with who should get him full time.  Finally he made the decision to care for her and resigned from Columbia Bible College and Seminary. In his resignation speech he said:

I haven’t in my life experienced easy decision making on major decisions.  But one of the simplest and clearest decisions I’ve had to make is this one, because circumstances dictated it.  Muriel now in the last couple of months seems to be almost happy when with me and almost never happy when not with me.  In fact she seems to feel trapped, becomes very fearful, sometimes almost terror, and when she can’t get to me there can be anger, she’s in distress.  But when I am with her she's happy and contented.  And so I must be with her at all times.  And you see, it’s not only that I promised in sickness and in health till death do us part, and I am a man of my word, but as I have said, I don’t know with this group, but I have said publicly, it’s the only fair thing. She sacrificed for me for forty years, to make my life possible.  So if I cared for her for forty years, I would still be in debt.  However, there is much more.  It’s not that I have to; it’s that I get to.  I love her very dearly, and you can tell it’s not easy to talk about.  She is a delight.  It’s a great honor to care for such a wonderful person.*[[6]](#footnote-6)*

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us;

and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren . . . Little children,

 let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and in truth.

 –1 John 3:16, 18

*. . . applying all diligence, in your faith supply . . . brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

–2 Peter 2:5-8

1. Adapted from Clyde Murdock, *A Treasury of Humor* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), #30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1967), 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Katherine D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*: *A New Inquiry* (Scholars Press , 1978), 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The statement of Ruth is not indicative of a Lordship commitment to gain eternal life. Her statement is akin to the declaration a believer today might make at baptism concerning following Christ in discipleship and identifying with His church. We could assume that Ruth had come to faith in Yahweh earlier perhaps through the witness of Naomi concerning Abraham and God’s promise to him of a seed through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. The Apostle Paul verified in Romans 4:1-8 (quoting Gen 15:6 and Ps 32:2) that both Abraham and David (Ruth’s great grandson) were declared righteous before God by faith and not by works. Like them Ruth would have believed the promise of God and have it reckoned to her as righteousness. The genealogical line that leads to the Messiah who promises eternal life to everyone who simply believes in Him for it passes through Ruth and Boaz (Mat 1:5). The loyal-love that Ruth demonstrates can be compared to the brotherly kindness and love that caps the qualities that Peter instructs believers to supply upon the foundation of faith in 2 Pet 1:4-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. CT carried a number of articles on McQuilkin and his care for Muriel. They can be read online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/february/8.64.html?paging=off>, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/februaryweb-only/2-9-11.0.html?paging=off>, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/februaryweb-only/2-9-12.0.html?paging=off>, accessed 8/13/12. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See and hear this on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6pX1phIqug>, accessed 8/13/12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)