

Ruth: The Inconsequential Outsider

The Weft And Warp Of Scripture

The word of God is like a vast tapestry, its main theme interwoven with many sub-plots and side stories that run like golden threads through an intricate design. Each of these threads complements the complete telling of [God's story](#) and narrates again and again to us the way in which God views our world and us, the people who inhabit it.

The story of Ruth, a seemingly inconsequential outsider, is one of these golden threads. At face value, it appears to be a brief narrative concerning an unimportant family, living in a [small and insignificant rural village*](#). It hardly seems a grand stage on which the compelling drama of God's purpose is to be acted out.

The story is placed within the time period known as "The Judges" (thought to be around 1220 – 1050 B.C.), when heroes like Samson the Mighty and Ehud the Brave lived- impressive and inspiring characters, who took centre stage in the dramas that unfolded around them.

The story of Ruth seems, at first glance, a strange and somewhat ordinary inclusion in the rather extraordinary cast that surrounds it. And yet, when we consider each part of this remarkable story, we understand that we are being told something very important about God and about ourselves. We learn that God sees into our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7). He is more interested in what we can become, than in who we are right now, and that our very ordinariness is what God sees and works with to bring us to an extraordinary place.

In fact, God often does some of His best work with the most

unlikely people, as the story of Ruth proves.

Who Was Ruth?

Ruth was, by definition, an outsider. She was not an Israelite but a native of the country of [Moab](#), a mountainous tract of land now in modern Jordan. She had married an Israelite man who was living in Moab with his family; his parents and his brother. The family had relocated due to a famine that had occurred in their homeland and in chapter 1 of the story, Ruth and her husband had been married for 10 years before he, and his brother, both fell ill and died.

It seems tragedy had already befallen the family previously, with the death of Elimelech, Ruth's father-in-law, very soon after the family's relocation. The death of the sons now left Ruth, her sister-in-law, Orpah, and Naomi, her mother-in-law, as widows, in probably very bleak circumstances.

Ruth was, of all people, an unlikely heroine. Not only was she a woman, in a time when women were of minor importance, but she was also now a widow. Finally, she was poor and foreign and would have been considered an outsider to any true-born Israelite.

Ruth's Story

Ruth may have been poor in position but she was rich in love and faith. When Naomi, her mother-in-law, made the decision to return to her homeland of Israel, Ruth did not hesitate to follow her. She left all that was familiar, everything that she was culturally connected to, and, much like [faithful Abraham](#) before her, she *"went out, not knowing where she was going..."* (Hebrews 11:8).

She heard the call of God and she followed, with an implicit faith and unswerving devotion. She trusted the journey and embraced the destination, even though she hadn't yet seen it.

This is the definition of faith (Hebrews 11:1-3). Faith is what distinguishes her character and faith is what motivated her choices, which become more and more evident to us as we discover her story.

The story is short in its telling and it's well worth pausing here and [reading it quickly for yourself](#).

Like every great story, it contains all the important elements of interest; drama, grief, desolation, decision, redemption, and resolution. As a stand-alone story, it would be successful in its own right. Yet it is the conclusion to the story that makes us really sit up and take notice. This is where we realise that nothing is an afterthought to God, nobody is *actually* inconsequential and His plan is purposeful and far-reaching.

He has a definitive purpose and plan and every single person can play their part. There is a place for all of us in God's story, if we choose it.

Ruth made the choice and decision to follow Naomi, to become part of God's plan. Yet even she couldn't have realised the extent to which God would involve her. The epilogue of the story contains an unbelievable twist, a beautiful thread that we almost have to read twice to believe.

Ruth's Defining Legacy

Ruth found a home, belonging, and happiness in Israel and went on to marry Boaz, a wealthy and respected landowner. She was accepted completely into the family of [Abraham](#), father of the Israelite people.

She also became the mother to a little boy called Obed (Ruth 4:16). Obed was the father of Jesse and Jesse, in time, became the father of David, one of the greatest kings in Israel's history. David would become famous, not only for his skill with the harp and his compassionate love for and protection of

his sheep as a shepherd boy but also for his courage and bravery in fighting against the enemy Goliath, his stirring example as a brilliant military leader and king, and his complete trust and faith in God.

Most breathtaking of all, King David became an ancestor of Jesus Christ, God's own Son! This makes Ruth an incredibly significant and vital part of God's plan of salvation for the world.

God's methods often [confound and confuse us](#). He doesn't always choose who we would expect or work in the way we would like. He sees all, from the beginning to the end (Isaiah 46:10), while we can only see a small portion of now. His purpose is perfectly orchestrated and remarkably interwoven in ways that amaze us.

In the story of Ruth, an inconsequential outsider, we see that God gets involved in the lives of all kinds of men and women, bringing about His purpose. We can take confidence and have faith that He can and will work in our lives, in the same way, and that we too can become part of [His story](#), if we choose it.

* Here's another plot twist for those of you who love a good story! Wondering about that "small and insignificant rural village", found at the beginning of this tale? That village is none other than the little town of Bethlehem, where, many years from Ruth's time, a small baby [would be born](#), in humble circumstances, and would be laid, sleeping, in a manger; [Jesus – the hope of the world!](#)

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Religion // Cruciformity

There is no standard scholarly agreement on what exactly is meant by the word *religion*, so defining *religion* (from the Latin *religiō*) can be a bit tricky. In fact, prior to the 16th and 17th centuries, the concept of religion, as a *distinct set of beliefs or doctrines*, didn't really exist.

Today, we would probably summarise religion as a *unifying social-cultural system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred, supernatural, or spiritual elements*. We may tend to also think of religion, particularly in a Christian context, as somewhat *creedal*, that is, as a set of ideas, formulas, regulations, or practices that are defined in some formal way, such as through statements, creeds, confessions, and denominational distinctives.

The word religion, from the Latin *religiō*, meaning 'to bind', is a word which in the ancient and medieval world was used to refer to *individual virtue of worship; respect for what was sacred*, and a *reverence for the divine*. It described an attitude of *being* rather than a *creedal position* and it related to the *individual* rather than the *collective*.

The act of *binding to* – of *religio* – is an act of faithfulness to something or someone, to which one is bound as if by a pledge or duty. It's similar to when someone makes an *oath of allegiance* to their country, effectively *binding themselves* to that country and pledging to respect, uphold and obey its laws.

In fact, companions to the word *religio* would be words like *duty, fealty, allegiance, or obedience*. Used with its original meaning in mind, it's a worthy addition to a list of descriptors we might use for the relationship that is formed when someone surrenders authority over their life to Jesus.

Religion is actually a necessary undertaking of every

Christian who wishes to give their life and allegiance to Jesus as king and who chooses to surrender to his guidance and leadership in their life. This *binding* to Jesus – *religio* – and the reality that he becomes everything in a person's life – is what it means to become a child of God, joined to the mission of God to the world and submitting to His will, in Christ, for our lives. It is an act of individual virtue of worship, not simply an acceptance of a creedal statement or list of practices.

“So, then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” | Ephesians 2:19-20 CSB

For many of us, however, this isn't our experience of religion.

What we may have experienced or grown up with and what we would describe as *religion* is probably; adherence to a distinct set of beliefs, doctrines, or practices (some of which find their roots in scripture, some which don't).

Perhaps our family's beliefs eventually became our own; their set of doctrines were absorbed as ours, and we found ourselves one day 'a Christian, attending church', without giving too much thought to the process by which we got there. We accepted, without question, someone else's *religion*, as we might accept an old, hand-me-down sweater, thinking to make it our own.

Religious is perhaps what many of us became; that is, we converted to Christianity by adopting a set of beliefs and practices related to the historical figure of Jesus. Our *religiosity* as Christians might have been further defined by our identification with one particular denomination's creeds and practices over another.

Yet both these actions are not describing the true nature of *religion*. The differences may be subtle, almost indistinguishable from one another; however the reality is that what we may have ended up giving our allegiance to was a *system*, rather than to *Jesus*.

While being a Christian is certainly communal, and while Christians tend to believe mostly all the same fundamental creeds, and while the creeds and practices of Christianity can be taught and preached and are, in many ways, intrinsically invaluable to religion, *true religion* is the *individual and deeply personal matter of an individual's binding to the person of Christ*.

Religion, in the true sense of the word, cannot be passed down.

'Part of the genius of genuine Christianity is that each generation has to think it through afresh. Precisely because God wants every single Christian to grow up in understanding as well as trust, the Christian faith has never been something that one generation can sort out in such a way as to leave their successors with no work to do.' (N T Wright)

"Don't think of worship in terms of attending a church service, singing praise and worship songs or honouring the name of Jesus. The meaning of worship touches much larger questions. Namely, worship is all about who has the authority over our lives. Who will have our submission? Who will be given first place? Who will win our love, allegiance and devotion? True worship is absolute committal, surrender and submission to God." | Frank Viola, Insurgence

Counterfeit Religion

Paul the Apostle wrote his letter to the Galatians addressing an idea that had taken root at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did plus additional 'spiritual

acts' that are undertaken, that we are made "*right with God by what we do*".

However, this is performance-based Christianity – in fact, probably a rather apt description of our modern understanding of *religion*. Paul reiterates to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

"Foolish Galatians, who has cunningly deceived you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly set forth as crucified? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now completed in the flesh? He therefore who supplies the Spirit to you, and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by hearing of faith?" | Galatians 3:1-5, New Heart English Bible

Patterns of thought, actions, or behaviours, which are deemed 'godly' 'spiritual' or 'biblical' can often become the outward markers of people who are perceived to be *religious* but may, in reality, mask a heart far from allegiance to Christ.

Anything apart from 'binding to the cross of Jesus' results in toxic faith – *religion* that has gone wrong, leading to dependence on others' approval and not God's. Anything that adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and binds us to human systems of belief or worship, and not to God.

Yielding our allegiance to a set of beliefs, as *the primary driving force*, will result in Christians who may have a form of godliness but who deny the miraculous power of transformation implicit in such a life; a Christian life marked by the cruciform love of Jesus (John 13:5).

It is, quite simply, putting the cart before the horse.

As Christian Evangelist Gordon Fee comments, *“If you had asked Paul to define what a Christian is, he would not have said, ‘A Christian is a person who believes X and Y doctrines about Christ,’ but ‘A Christian is a person who walks in the Spirit, who **knows** Christ.’”* (Gordon Fee, 1934-2022)

There is a subtle yet crucial difference and the long-term effects of mistaking one for the other can be disastrous.

Christian life will become joyless, suffocating, without meaning, and without power. This kind of Christian morphs into ‘clouds without water, carried along by the wind, inflated but empty; fruitless trees in autumn, whose branches are disappointingly empty at harvest time.’ They become rooted in performance, rules, patterns of behaviour, and intractable systems of belief that leave very little room for any theological growth or deeper understanding. The lifeblood of faith – the crucified and resurrected Christ – seems almost an afterthought when laid alongside the many parameters they will use to define their *religion*.

Critically, a true and meaningful relationship with God will never be sustained on this basis.

“When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.” – Abraham Heschel

This is why Paul makes what initially seems to be a brief and insignificant statement regarding the gospel (but is, in actual fact, one of the most powerful statements he makes), *“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David; such is my gospel.”* (2 Timothy 2:8, ISV).

The starting point – the impetus behind the act of binding to (*religio*) for the Christian life is *faith by grace alone in the crucified Christ*. The animating and life-transforming force in a Christian's [walk with God](#) is the [resurrection life](#) of the living Christ; a cruciform life.

This, and this alone, is what any Christian must first and foremost be bound to.

“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” | 1 Corinthians 2:1-3, CSB

Journey To Cruciformity

Choosing Jesus, truly choosing him above all else, means rethinking everything you thought you knew about your faith and what – or who – your life is bound to. It means learning that your identity must rest on the rock of Christ, not in others' opinions of you or in the set of beliefs to which they subscribe, even if those beliefs are ones which you would agree with. It means making decisions others can and will criticise and judge you for. It means being much less certain in your own abilities and more certain in the reality of God's grace in your life.

It means wrestling and arguing with God, with fervent prayer and pleading, to finally arriving at the understanding that God will provide everything that you need. It means, perhaps, starting again at the place where Jesus needs to truly become the Lord of your life; that he has your complete allegiance and your life is bound to his.

You may discover that what you have been searching for, all this time, to feel whole and secure, will only be found in the one who loved like no other, laying down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

"To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus, for my life is wholly bound (religio) to his. Oh, how strange and divine, I can sing: all is mine. Yet not I, but through Christ in me." | City Alight

Jesus taught his disciples that following him meant that one had to be willing to *"pick up their cross daily"* (Luke 9:23; 14:27). Cruciformity is, in essence, *conformity to the cross*; a life that is shaped by the narrative of the cross.

Cruciformity was the beating heart of God's mission to the world demonstrated in full measure by the ministry of Jesus, who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:1-17). The cruciform life, therefore, is one that is a living exegesis of the story of Jesus, beginning firstly in identification with his death and then flowing outwards in a living embodiment of his resurrection.

Cruciformity does not mean *'being spiritual'* or *'belonging to a faith community'* or *'seeking spiritual direction'*. Of course, it may involve those things but the cruciform life is grounded in the wholehearted trust that God will keep His promises, demonstrated in the crucified Jesus, and this trust is constantly affirmed and expressed by a transformed life.

A truly cruciform, gospel-shaped life starts with the activity of God. It is God who is saving us and it is God who is renewing us. It is God who accepts our belief in the sacrifice of Jesus and sends [His Spirit](#) into our lives to regenerate us as new creatures in His Son.

A cruciform life is one that is pointed in pursuit of Jesus and utterly and completely *bound to him*.

"A person who lives by the indwelling life of Christ through the Holy Spirit is a person who is under Law. But it is not the Law of Moses. Nor is it a Law that some preacher created

from his own personal standards. No, the Law I'm referring to is 'the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:3). This Law is like the law of gravity; it's a constant force or power. You and I have an indwelling Lord. The Law of God has been written on our hearts because Jesus Christ lives within us by his Spirit. This is the promise of the new covenant. Spiritual people (religious people)(italics, ours) are those who live by the Lord's life that indwells them. They know by instinct what the will of God is (1 John 2:27). Where the Spirit leads them, they yield to it (for the most part) – no matter what the cost. And life and peace are the results (Romans 8:6). The external Law, then, is no longer an outward thing full of dead letters and cold commands. It has been transferred into the indwelling life of Christ. To live by Christ is our highest calling as people of the insurgence." | Frank Viola, *Insurgence*

"Christ carried the burden of our sins. He was nailed to the cross, so we would stop sinning and start living right. By his cuts and bruises, you are healed. You had wandered away like sheep. Now you have returned to the one who is your shepherd and protector." | 1 Peter 2:24-25, CSB

***"The word 'theology' literally means '*thinking about God*'. One classic definition of theology was given by St Anselm. He called it '*faith seeking understanding*' and for many this is the true function of Christian theology."** | Paul Badham

Our theology – what we think about God – is therefore important. How can we begin to know and understand ourselves and our place in this expansive creation if we have no sense of the One who made us and the purpose for which we've been made?

However, a robust and living theology will spring from knowing

and experiencing *who God is* and what *He has done for us*, in Jesus, and is not simply giving agreement to a statement or creed of 'theological beliefs'.

By affirming the biblical narrative, that we are saved by grace through faith alone, we begin a journey towards a deeper understanding of *who God is*, which only grows as our Christian life progresses. Our theology is, perhaps then, best described as an expedition of discovery, rather than a destination at which we arrive. We discern more and more about the heart and mind of the Creator as our life progresses. This knowing and experiencing – this [walking with God](#) – renews us day by day to become more like the crucified Lord we follow.

Jesus was the exact representation of God and the very imprint of His nature ([Hebrews 1:3](#), [John 14:10-11](#)), the Word-made-flesh who took up residence amongst us ([John 1:1-14](#)). By knowing him, we can know God (Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3, 2 Peter 1:3).

To know God is to know Jesus, whom He sent (John 17:3) and, therefore, the true starting point of our *theology* as Christians is looking to Jesus and, fundamentally, to Jesus crucified. Our *theology* begins with *cruciformity*; a life first and foremost surrendered to the crucified Christ in faith.

Theology, *true theology* – thinking about God – will be seen and witnessed in cruciformity (Galatians 5:22-23); a life pointed in pursuit of Jesus and utterly and completely *bound to him*.

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