

BETHLEHEM: THE PLACE OF JOY**RUTH 4:1-17**

The beginning of the Advent season was just one week away. Michelle Hardie and her husband wanted to what their children remembered from their family devotions the year before. "Who can tell me what the four candles in the Advent wreath represent?" Michelle asked. Seven year old Luke jumped in. "There's love, joy, peace, and... and...." "I know!" six-year-old Elise interrupted to finish her brother's sentence: "Peace and quiet!" Amen to that! Today I want you think with me about joy.

What is joy, after all? Let me suggest a simple definition. Biblically, joy is great delight caused by something good God has done for you. It can be on a small scale. For instance, joy can be the result of a specific prayer request that you asked of God and He answered. You prayed for someone with a serious illness and God healed him or her. You prayed for a new job and God gave you one. You prayed for a better relationship with your spouse, and you now see marked improvement. Joy can also be on a large scale. You feel enormous gratitude well up within you toward God for sending Jesus into the world, for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our sins, or how His resurrection changes the fact of death forever for you and all of His followers. Joy comes in all shapes and sizes. But joy always finds its source in God. It's the result of God's goodness, God's blessing, and God's grace poured into your life in some way.

The last chapter in the story of Ruth is full of joy. Again, this Old Testament story happened in the town of Bethlehem – the very same town where Jesus was born about 1100 years later. That's why this year's Advent message series has been called *Another Story About Bethlehem: Glimpses of Christmas in the Story of Ruth*. Previously, we've considered how Bethlehem became a place of hope, a place of peace, and a place of love for Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, after they came through a time of tremendous adversity and turmoil in their own lives. 1100 years later, Bethlehem became a place of hope, a place of peace, and a place of love once again when Jesus was born there on the first Christmas Day. Today, let's consider how Bethlehem became a place of joy for Ruth and Naomi and, then, for the world 1100 years later when Jesus was born in the very same town.

Let's read the conclusion of Ruth's story in your Bible today. Next Sunday, we'll look at those final verses in chapter four and consider how Bethlehem became a place to rejoice both in Ruth's story and the story of Jesus' birth. I know in our culture that Christmas Day is full of gift-giving, family get-togethers and wonderful feasts, but there's nothing more fitting and appropriate for followers of Jesus to do than to participate in a worship service celebrating His birth. I encourage you to make a special effort to join us next Sunday at 10:30. But, today, let's reflect on how Bethlehem became a place of joy. Well, Boaz and Ruth finally got married. Joy! Then God allowed them to have a baby who was named Obed. Joy! Then Obed became Naomi's legal child or heir meaning that her family line would continue – a matter of great importance to people back then. Joy! And although Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi would not live to understand the significance of it, they all became ancestors of Israel's greatest king, King David, and

even more importantly, of Jesus Himself some 1100 years later. Joy! What can we learn about joy from this story? First of all...

JOY IS THE RESULT OF PURSUING GOD WHOLEHEARTEDLY.

Before we go any further, let me suggest you and I are made for joy but we often seek it in the wrong places. We crave joy. We seek joy. But, sadly, we often look for it by pursuing the right kind of job or career, for example. Or we try to achieve it through financial success. Others seek joy by accumulating stuff – houses, cars, or luxury items. Some of us even try to find joy in people – in a happy marriage, in kids, or in close friends. As worthwhile as a good job, success, and happy relationships with other people might be, God never created you to find joy in personal achievements or other people. Happiness, maybe, but not joy. Never joy. True, genuine, real joy is only and forever the wonderful result or by-product of a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus. That's the only way to get it; that's the only way to keep it.

The best example in the book of Ruth of joy being the result of pursuing God wholeheartedly is Ruth herself. She underlined the truth that God gives joy to anyone who genuinely seeks Him. She wasn't an Israelite. She was from a country next door, Moab. She had married one of Naomi's sons. Through that family she was exposed to the one, true God. There came a moment in her life when she deliberately chose to turn her back on her own, false religion and pursue the one, true God with all of her heart. We heard it when she told Naomi, "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." (Ruth 1:16 NLT) God still expected Ruth to act in faith. She turned her back on living in Moab which looked like a better situation from a human perspective. She moved with Naomi back to Bethlehem and accepted the possibility of living in chronic poverty and lifelong loneliness as a foreign widow herself. God allowed some big trust tests in Ruth's life.

But, then, God led her step by step into incredible joy and blessing. She just "happened" to end up gleaning in the field of Boaz, a distant relative of Naomi's dead husband, Elimelech. Boaz just "happened" to come to his field that day and he was very impressed with Ruth's diligence and her love for Naomi. Eventually, Ruth and Boaz became husband and wife. Ruth was no longer a foreigner, a widow, or a lowly servant. She was now the wife of a respected, influential man. She had abundant provision and protection. She and Boaz probably had several children, but the very first one, Obed, became Naomi's legal child and heir – something Ruth desperately wanted to do for Naomi whom she loved so deeply. Naomi's family didn't die out after all. Obed would inherit everything belonging to Elimelech's family and perpetuate his name. Ruth was filled with joy!

But then, you and I, the readers of this great story get in on the magnitude of God's blessing – something Ruth could not have seen this side of Heaven. She became a great-grandmother of King David! Even more amazing, she became an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself! In one of the genealogies of Jesus' ancestors, we read, "Salmon was the father of Boaz (whose mother was Rahab). Boaz was the father of

Obed (whose mother was Ruth).” (Mt 1:5 NLT) On it goes right down to Jesus. Jesus’ biological lineage included Ruth. Think about the significance of that for a moment. Something of the DNA of Ruth was embedded in the DNA of baby Jesus lying in that manger in Bethlehem. Without Ruth, Jesus would not be the same Jesus. Who could have predicted such a destiny for a poor, widowed, Moabite immigrant? It makes me think of something Boaz said to Ruth. “May the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done.” (Ruth 2:12 NLT) Hadn’t God done exactly that and more? Ruth had indeed pursued God wholeheartedly seeking refuge under His wings. God had rewarded her with such great joy and blessing as a result. Bethlehem was indeed a place of joy.

1100 years later Bethlehem was again a place of joy. I’m thinking about the wise men because the Bible tells us, specifically, that joy marked their visit to baby Jesus. The Bible says of them, “When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.” (Mt 2:10-11 NLT) A translation of the literal Greek there might read this way – “...they rejoiced with a joy great exceedingly.” (Mt 2:10) Whoever they were and wherever they were from exactly, one fact is very clear. The wise men were pursuing Jesus wholeheartedly and they found joy as a result. Great joy. Profound joy. Wonderful joy. Just like Ruth did. They underlined the truth, just like Ruth, that God gives joy to anyone who genuinely seeks Him. You can claim the same promise today. Back then, you didn’t have to be born into a Jewish family to know God. Ruth wasn’t Jewish. Neither were the wise men. Today, you don’t have to be born into a Christian family to know God. You don’t have to have lived a perfect life, an easy life, or a sinless life. Your “credentials” or lack of them mean nothing to God. You just have to pursue God wholeheartedly. Start today. Seek Him. Chase Him down. Run after Him. And when you do that, you can be sure God will give you His joy as a direct result. He gives joy to anyone and everyone who genuinely seeks Him wholeheartedly.

JOY IS THE RESULT OF DOING LIFE GOD’S WAY CONSISTENTLY.

Pastor and author, Eugene Peterson, wrote a book entitled *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. That interesting title points to the relationship between consistent obedience and God’s blessings. Not just once and a while, intermittent, here and there obedience. The greatest blessings go to those who make up their minds to obey God and live God’s way consistently, repeatedly, habitually, over and over again. Of course, no one’s perfect. We’ve all sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. Additionally, no one deserves or earns any of God’s blessings ever. By the same token, God’s blessings aren’t automatic. Blessing follows obedience. Those who find a way to do life God’s way consistently, repeatedly, and habitually enjoy God’s blessings more than those who don’t. They just experience more joy. As a pastor, I can tell you I’ve interacted with many people over the years who kind of wander in and out of trying to follow Jesus with any consistency. They come to church for a while. They start using religious jargon. They go through the motions. Then they disappear for a few months or several years. They try and do life God’s way for a while, but they just don’t stick with it with any

consistency. Whatever the reasons or excuses, they just avoid a long obedience in the same direction. Is it any wonder they miss out on God's joy?

If you want to experience God's joy in your life more often than not, you're going to have to do life God's way. That, too, is a clear message from the book of Ruth. Doing life God's way consistently means practicing godly integrity. A specific example of that principle is how Boaz handled the redemption of Naomi's property and his marriage to Ruth. Back in chapter three, Ruth invited Boaz to act as a kinsman redeemer. In doing so, Boaz would purchase family property belonging to Naomi and also marry Ruth. Their first son born would legally become Naomi's heir and, when he was of age, he would inherit the land bought from Naomi. Boaz was willing, but he told Ruth that he was second in line in any such arrangement. Fairness, integrity, and doing things the right way mattered greatly to him. There was a big risk involved. If the relative closer to Naomi wanted to act as a kinsman redeemer, Boaz would have to yield to him. He had the right to marry Ruth instead of Boaz. Boaz and Ruth may have loved each other by now, but doing the right thing mattered more. A guilty conscience will destroy joy.

So in chapter four, we read how Boaz tracked down his relative at Bethlehem's city gate and gathered ten elders as witnesses to their discussion. He explained the situation and, at first, the other man was willing to act as the kinsman redeemer. But when he learned that it entailed marrying Ruth and supporting her long term, he declined. Now the way was clear for Boaz to assume the role of kinsman redeemer. And it was all done properly, legally, and with complete integrity. All the citizens of Bethlehem were able to say, "Boaz did the right thing and he did it in the right way." An inevitable result of practicing godly integrity in your home, at work, at school, in the neighborhood – in any and every arena of life – is a kind of joy that only God can give. Living with integrity doesn't eliminate every risk. Boaz took a big risk. Living with integrity doesn't guarantee everything will go your way all the time. But if you practice integrity over the long haul of your life, you will ultimately experience God's great and lasting joy.

Doing life God's way consistently also means practicing God's kind of love. Last week we explored the Old Testament word for God's love – "hesed." It means love expressed through kindness, faithfulness, loyalty, and devotion. It's how God loves us. In addition, through the Holy Spirit, we can love God and other people with God's kind of love. We, too, can practice "hesed." God's kind of love is all over the story of Ruth. Naomi showed Ruth God's kind of love by going way above and beyond what was customary and necessary for a mother-in-law to do for her daughter-in-law. Ruth herself is a powerful example of God's kind of love. She turned her back on her own family and her homeland to follow the one, true God and take care of Naomi as best she could. She, then, invited Boaz to marry her as a kinsman redeemer which meant their first child would become Naomi's legal son and heir.

The greatest example of God's love in Boaz's life was his desire and willingness to become Naomi and Ruth's kinsman redeemer. He was willing to do what the other relative – the one actually more closely related to Naomi – was not willing to do. Just buying Naomi's property was a bargain without any risk. There were no known heirs to

reclaim the property down the road and Naomi herself was not likely to produce any new ones. His small investment would likely yield years of productive, profitable harvests and the land would become part of his estate and be passed on to his heirs after Naomi died. But when Boaz informed him that buying the property automatically made Ruth his wife, the other man balked. Why? It was no longer such a good deal. Now he would spend his personal assets buying Naomi's field only to lose his investment to his and Ruth's first child who would inherit it without repayment. Besides the lost investment, the additional expense of providing for Naomi, Ruth and any children would further drain his wealth. The other man did nothing wrong by refusing to act as a kinsman redeemer, but he didn't practice God's kind of love toward Naomi or Ruth either. Although living under the very same rules and circumstances as the other relative, Boaz joyfully accepted this duty and responsibility at great personal cost. Boaz modeled an outstanding example of "hesed" – God's kind of love.

When you live out God's kind of love toward others, it will cost you something. I think of what it cost Jesus to love you and me with God's kind of love. It cost Him life in Heaven for a period of time. It cost Him all the limitations of becoming a human being on the first Christmas Day. It cost Him the unimaginable spiritual and physical suffering of the cross. But how does the Bible put it? "Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne." (Heb 12:2 NLT) Showing God's kind of love always costs you and me something: time, energy, money, convenience, safety, patience, something. Then why try to love God and other people with God's kind of love? Joy! Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz didn't become joyless by showing God's kind of love. They became joyful. They found joy. They experienced joy. They discovered joy. If you practice God's kind of love consistently, you will ultimately experience God's great and lasting joy. A final thought.

JOY IS THE RESULT OF TRUSTING GOD REGARDLESS.

I'm thinking of Naomi right here. Joy is given when we trust in God despite life's heartaches. Do you remember how devastated she was once she got back to Bethlehem? Her husband was dead. Both her sons were dead. She had no grandchildren. She was probably herself beyond child-bearing years, so remarriage for her was doubtful. She faced a life of poverty and vulnerability. Her family faced the prospect of dying out. She loved Ruth dearly, but she was deeply worried about her future. What prospects did Ruth, a Moabite widow, have in Bethlehem or remarriage and a family of her own? "Don't call me Naomi (pleasant).... Instead, call me Mara (bitter), for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi when the LORD has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me?" (Ruth 1:20-21 NLT)

Sometimes faith and trust in God is simply holding onto God the best we can in the worst of times. Naomi never abandoned God. There is plenty of evidence that points to the fact that she believed God was still at work in her life and Ruth's life. Can you imagine the joy Naomi must have felt holding little baby Obed in her arms? God had answered her desperate prayers. God had provided for her and Ruth miraculously.

God was truly good after all. He did love just ordinary, normal people. Her family would not die out. I think of how well one of my favorite Bible verses fits Naomi. “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jer 29:11 NLT) Naomi now had a future and a hope! She’s an example to me of a follower of Jesus who surrenders those bitter, unanswered questions about life to God and embraces the certainty of God’s presence nevertheless.

I love how her friends, some of the other women living there in Bethlehem, reminded Naomi of how good God had been to her after all. “Praise the LORD, who has now provided a redeemer for your family! May this child be famous in Israel. May he restore your youth and care for you in your old age. For he is the son of your daughter-in-law who loves you and has been better to you than seven sons!” (Ruth 4:14-15 NLT) No one could imagine back then being more blessed than to have seven sons. That was the height of blessing! But the women reminded her that Ruth – a foreign woman, a daughter-in-law rather than a daughter – had proven herself more valuable than if Naomi had given birth to seven sons who were still alive!

But notice who gets the praise first and foremost! God does. “Praise the LORD, who has now provided a redeemer for your family!” (Ruth 4:14 NLT) There are no overt miracles in the book of Ruth. No parting seas. No exploding mountains. No food falling from Heaven. But God is still very much at work in and through the lives of just ordinary people like you and me who trust in God regardless. God works through you and me indirectly to accomplish His will just as much as when He works directly. The story of Ruth illustrates that great truth. And at the end of it all is joy. It makes me think of that great verse, “Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.” (Eph 3:10 NLT) Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz experienced that verse before it was ever written down. You and I can experience it today just as well. Bethlehem: the place of joy.

Roy Borges is a committed Christian. He became one in the chapel of the prison where he was serving time for a crime he’d committed. While in prison, Roy became a writer. He wrote about the fifteenth Christmas he spent locked behind the razor-wire fences of a Florida prison. Less-than-festive conditions to be sure. But that fifteenth Christmas behind bars looked even bleaker. Roy was stuck in confinement—a prison inside a prison where the supposed troublemakers are sent. But, in reality, anyone can find himself in solitary confinement by irritating the wrong person. Because Roy was going to be locked in a cell 24 hours a day through Christmas, he assumed nothing memorable could happen. There certainly wasn’t much to look forward to.

Alone in his cell on Christmas night in confinement, Roy read in his Bible about Paul and Silas, who were also inside a prison. Despite their miserable predicament, they were praying and singing hymns to God while the other prisoners listened. The lights went out and Roy stared at the ceiling from his bunk, wondering if he could praise God in the midst of his circumstances. Then suddenly he heard a voice come out of the vent above the toilet. It was Andrew in the next cell. “Merry Christmas, Roy,” he said. “Merry Christmas, Andrew,” I replied. “Do you know any Christmas songs?” Andrew

asked. "Yeah, I know a few." "I'll sing one if you'll sing one," he said. "What should we sing?" "Joy to the World." Andrew sang every verse. Roy sang the chorus with him. Then it was Roy's turn and he chose "Silent Night." Then Andrew sang "O Come All Ye Faithful," and Roy answered with "Feliz Navidad." "I have another song," Andrew said. All by himself, he sang "O Holy Night." Silence filled the quad as everyone listened. It was a moment Roy says he'll never forget. It not only reminded him of Paul and Silas, but it made him realize every day is Christmas when God has arrived. It wasn't just another day, and he wasn't really alone. Emmanuel was in confinement with Roy – right there in his prison cell - blessing him with the gift of joy.

There are all kinds of prison cells. Roy Borges was in a literal one that Christmas Day. Naomi and Ruth had been in a different kind of cell. Call it tragedy, despair, discouragement, fear. But they continued to hold on to God regardless. And God showed up. Did He ever! My prayer and hope for you today is that God will show up in your life – even if today you feel like you're living in some hopeless, lonely place. God is right there with you. Keep on pursuing God wholeheartedly. Keep on doing life God's way consistently. Keep on trusting God regardless. The result will be joy.