



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

October 31, 2021

# God's Loyalty Program

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 4, 2021

Westminster's by-laws perfectly aligned the day we celebrate the Reformation with the day we elect people called by God to govern and serve this congregation. More than 500 years ago, ordinary people, across diverse geographies and professions re-formed the church, returning it to the hands and hearts of the people.

Let's turn to one of the most beautiful love stories in scripture of a time when people re-formed the entrenched ways.

At a brief eighty-five verses, the Book of Ruth tells the story of God's enduring loyalty. More than fifty of the verses are dialogue between two women. In the male dominated world of the Ancient Near East this simple story stands out for the message it conveys of God's consistent presence in our lives, turning us from despair, and pushing us into a future no one anticipates.

Quick summary. A family flees Bethlehem during a famine seeking food in Moab, an enemy territory. During the ten years they live in Moab, the two sons marry foreign wives. Sadly, the father and sons die, leaving the mother, Naomi, and her daughters in law destitute.

Learning that Bethlehem emerged from the famine, Naomi decides to return to her late husband's tribe. Along the way, Naomi sends her daughters-in-law back to Moab. How would it look for her appear, already vulnerable, looking for security, saddled with these foreign women?

One of the Moabite women leaves. The other, Ruth, vows loyalty.

*God, you search us and know our hearts. You know our thoughts before they form words on our tongues. Calm us. Breathe your spirit into these, your words, that we are startled with courage to step into the future. Amen.*

### **Ruth 1:16-18**

Ruth said,

“Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.

<sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!”

<sup>18</sup> When Naomi saw that she was determined to go  
with her, she said no more.

Evan Moffic is a scholar, rabbi, and prolific writer for Christian audiences. He unpacks traditions for us to understand Judaism in the first century Palestine. In his book, *The Jewishness of Jesus*, he sheds some light on why

Jesus told stories and to understand why stories, such as Ruth, saturate our ancient scriptures.

Moffic claims that five words puts his daughter to sleep every night. They work like magic. He doesn't say them. She does. "Daddy, tell me a story."

Moffic explains what makes stories so powerful by telling a story.

Once upon a time a man named Truth walked around town. He looked down and out. People ignored him. They turned away. He felt frustrated.

Then he saw a friend "Story." Story dressed beautifully: Rich, luxurious clothes. A top hat and scarf.

Everyone came up to Story. They asked him questions and listened to his answers. He seemed to know just what to say to every person.

Truth then went up to Story and started complaining to him. "Why doesn't anyone listen to me," he asked. "What I have to say is so important."

Story answered, "The problem is not with you, dear Truth. It is with your appearance. If you would take the time to dress up, as I do, people would listen to you."

Truth understood. From then, he started to dress like Story.

And people started to listen to him. Even when they didn't like what Truth had to say, they listened. And they understood.

Moffic concludes, the best teachers know Truth tastes best with Story. And they know that stories reveal the deepest human truths.<sup>1</sup>

Jewish tradition is filled with storytellers. Indeed, a Jewish proverb teaches that God created the world because God loves stories.

We love stories, too. Not just bedtime stories, but stories that teach who we are and help us imagine who we can be.

Three particular books within Hebrew Scriptures, all written at the same time, tell of restoring the Israelite kingdom after the exile: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ruth.

Each of them addresses loyalty, to whom or what should we be loyal and in what ways, from differing philosophies in their attempt to inspire the Israelites to rebuild.

The prophetic books, Ezra and Nehemiah, specify plans to rebuild the temple, worship rituals to follow, and details, details, details of how to preserve Jewish culture. They ban foreign marriages, demand purging the city of outsiders, and advocate restoring purity within the ethnic bloodline.

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<sup>1</sup> Evan Moffic, *The Jewishness of Jesus*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016).

They professed loyalty to laws and tradition, regardless of the impact on human life.

The Book of Ruth counters with a potent critique against their doctrines.

That potent critique is clothed in a “once upon a time” fable. Set in the era before the kingdom existed, Ruth showcases the truth that God’s dominion is not a place, an ethnic lineage, customs, or even a religion.

The sacred lives in relationships that cross human boundaries.

Naomi and her husband and two sons fled their home and walked into a village in Moab as refugees. Ruth became a daughter to Naomi, by marrying one of her sons, joined their family, cooked meals, washed clothes, fetched water. For ten years. Very likely Ruth was a young teen when she became a part of this family, essentially growing up in a home with Naomi, who raised her into womanhood.

After the death of husbands, they grieve lost loves, lost homes, and fear an unknown future. No one could be more vulnerable than these women, so Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem.

Now on the road – not in Moab or Bethlehem – some in-between liminal space – Naomi decides to go it alone. Ruth argues. Ruth clings to her, wherever she goes. Ruth will not

accept the rules that she is not welcome because she is a Moabite. She trusts more in a love that grew from years of working together and living day-by-day as a family.

When she married, Ruth made a vow to her husband and upholds with her mother-in-law: “Your people will be my people, your God, my God. Where you die, I will die.” In this covenant, with God as the foundation, people come first over any customs.

Through Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi, God tears down some long-defended walls to prove again and again, relationships are sacred, blessed and pleasing to God.

The story continues. Ruth fulfills her vow by caring for Naomi. Her loving kindness inspires one of Naomi’s relatives to marry her and the son she bears launches the Israelite kingdom under David.

In Ruth, Truth dresses up like Story, persuading the Israelites to rally behind a God’s promised *hesed*. This Hebrew word *hesed* means loyalty expressed as loving-kindness. If there is a Hebrew word to know, it is *hesed*.

God describes God’s own self in Exodus as “merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast *hesed* (love), and faithfulness, keeping steadfast *hesed* (love), for thousands.

*Hesed* appears 246 times in the Old Testament as God initiates this loyalty, *hesed*, for and through the people.



*Hesed* always involves a personal relationship.

It is never merely an abstract feeling of goodwill but always entails practical care on behalf of another.

*Hesed* endures through God's unchanging nature and built into the continual ways God forgives and redeems us.<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel of Matthew celebrates Ruth in Jesus' lineage as the great- great- grandmother, remembering the story of her loyalty that changed the course of Israel.

In my former career, we helped design and implement a customer loyalty program for a retail bank. Their competitors were eating their lunch by luring away customers with the promise of earning points and merchandise.

Since you probably seen the commercial "what's in your wallet," I don't think I need to explain a loyalty program. You've got something in your wallet from a credit card company, airline, or grocery store that tries to coax you to behave in a way that benefits them.

The biggest impediment we had to overcome in designing this program was our own disillusionment of rewards programs. Our stories flowed of "earning" points to reach a status only to have a rule in the fine print make them worthless.

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<sup>2</sup> Will Kynes, "God's Grace in the Old Testament: Considering the *Hesed* of the Lord," *Knowing & Doing: C.S. Lewis Institute*, Summer 2010.

We all saw through the thin veneer of loyalty programs and resented the way they manipulated us to the benefit of the company without commensurate reward to us. We knew that whatever we designed would change and change again. We would gladly sign up for something enduring, that we could trust.

Which brings us back to God.

God's loyalty program never changes. From the very beginning, God made humankind, all humankind, in God's own image, and called us "very good."

All of the benefit within God's loyalty program accrue to us.

God blessed Abraham, first, in the covenant and asked only that he and his descendants remain faithful.

God affirmed this *hesed* by rescuing the Israelites from slavery.

Think of the countless, unlikely people through whom God worked to bring us back; Moses, Rahab, Hannah, Mary, and Paul. God inspired them to boldly move into the future, trusting God's promises.

This brings us to the Reformation. On this Reformation Sunday, we tell the stories of more people who reformed our worship and removed any of the barriers that came between God and us.

The church in Rome was just fine with doctrines and hierarchies that fed their interests, until a monk named Martin Luther in Wittenberg decided to dissent.

The church in Geneva could have kept away from the turmoil in Germany but the legal minded John Calvin, joined in the reform by arguing for the intimacy of scripture.

The church in Edinburgh could have ignored the wars on the continent, but enlightenment ideals spurred John Knox to instill democratic practices into the church.

God calls men and women to rise up, to stretch ourselves in being open to a new future, bound to one another and God in loving-kindness.

God's loyalty program never changes, but God changes us through people like us. The stories of their lives remind us of the potential and responsibility we share to let nothing get in the way of loving of God and neighbor.

May we tell their stories, Jesus' story, and the stories of our lives bear witness to the ultimate loyalty to God.



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