

Title Slide (just during short prayer)

What do children, Evel Knievel, Houdini, and survivors of chronic illnesses have in common? Well, for one, they're often mistakenly labeled, "courageous."

Robert Biswas-Diener, author of The Courage Quotient – is an expert in the field of courage. Robert offered a prize and asked people to nominate others for this prize who displayed exemplary courage. Robert said that one of the things he learned from this time was that it's an American notion that facing chronic illness is courageous (he said, wanting to live doesn't count as being courageous) and that most of the people nominated for the prize were people facing chronic illness – even though they hadn't actually done anything to prove their courage – just by existing with a chronic condition and wanting to get better, they were considered courageous.

So there are three main myths about courage. This is Myth #1 – It takes courage to survive.

Robert also said that people love to believe that children are courageous. He said children aren't. He said courage is about self-regulation [or self-control]. Children will never be as self-regulated as adults. And they're generally fearful – they don't like to try new things and they don't often appreciate the unknown. New foods, going into the basement, jumping in a pool, meeting new people – kids are generally held back by fears.

Here's the deal – I think we think we know what courage is but it's obvious that we're not very good at identifying it.

I also think that many of us would readily make a comparison between courage and stupidity. Secular author Evan Currie – and if this sounds familiar, it's because it's in your Focus Booklets – says that "The difference between courage and stupidity is measured by success and survival." In other words if you fail and die you were definitely doing something stupid – not something courageous.

That's Myth #2: Courage is the same as stupidity.

It's funny though, scripture never makes a correlation between stupidity and courage. Time and time again this familiar divine command is repeated throughout scripture – be strong and courageous. Particularly in Joshua but also in Deuteronomy, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, The Psalms, Ezekiel, and even 1 Corinthians. And not once is anyone commanded to be stupid. For scripture there seems to be an enormous gulf between folly, stupidity, recklessness and courage.

Not only are we bad at identifying courage, we're also bad at defining courage.

And lastly, Myth #3– I think most people assume that courage is rarely tested. We think it's for the big moments, the occasional difficult decisions, and most of the time it's for physical feats. So we end up thinking that courage isn't an urgent trait to develop. It's for firefighters, prophets, policemen, soldiers, and missionaries to violent and foreign people groups. But who needs courage in NE Minneapolis?

So what I'm trying to say is – I think we're bad at identifying courage, we're bad at defining courage, and we're bad at knowing when courage matters.

Today we're going to look at a woman – not a soldier, not a prophet, not a leader, not a person of significance in anyway. And when faced with a decision between something reasonable, practical, safe,

responsible, and morally upright vs something courageous, risky, and even at times unprofitable chooses courage. And as we investigate her life we see that time and time again courage dictates her decisions.

I want you to open your Bibles to **Ruth 1 and let's start off in verses 1-5**

¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³ Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

The author starts us off with some very important information. To set the stage, the story of Ruth happens in the days when the judges ruled. In other words – these were dark times. The Book of Judges is famous for the line, **“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.”** Although dark, the time of Judges for the Israelites is also a time of biblical heroes and miraculous events.

There's no miracles in the book of Ruth and there are no supernatural heroes either. There are ordinary, unimportant people who through acts of extraordinary courage and righteousness do the powerful work of God. The narrator of Ruth never mentions God but we see His guiding hand through the lives and words of the people. In other words guys – this is a book that speaks directly to the majority of us. We're ordinary people who can see God move – if we're willing to be uncommonly courageous.

Let's continue. There's a famine. **Elimelek has ironically taken his family out of Bethlehem** (which means house of bread) in search of bread, **away** from the Tabernacle, away from the ark of the covenant, and into Moab – a foreign, historically enemy country that worships the false god Kee-mosh (Chemosh) who at various times accepted child sacrifices. So as the book unfolds, it's a bad time period, and there's a bad famine, and there's a man making bad choices for his family.

Elimelek ends up dying. The family stays – probably longer than they originally intended to. Elimelek and Naomi's sons marry foreign women and continue in Moab for 10 years. At this point, heartbreakingly, the sons die too. The first five verses are filled with heartbreaking tragedy. The situation goes from bad to worse. Naomi will later reflect that she left Bethlehem full (despite the famine) and returned empty. The whole reason they left Bethlehem – to preserve their family seems to have been futile.

So Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem where she knows she has some extended family. **Let's keep reading.**

⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

Naomi says “Go Back to your family.” And she wants them to find new husbands. And she asks that Yahweh’s blessing would be on them as they obey her wishes.

And her daughters-in-law say, “we will go back with you.” They sort of use her language against her. She says “go back to your family” and they say “we will go back with you, our family.” And then Naomi launches into this hyperbolic monologue about what nonsense it would be for her daughters-in-law to follow her.

She says “I’m too old to get married, even if I do get married, I’m too old to have kids, even if I were able to have children, would you wait for them to grow up and then marry them? No... of course not. What a ridiculous plan.”

¹⁴ At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

I want you to see something. Orpah’s decision isn’t wicked or cowardly. She no longer has ties to her mother-in-law. Even by New Testament standards, remarriage is a completely viable option for her. She’s got family back in Moab. She has people and culture and she has hope AND she’s listening to the counsel of her mother-in-law. She’s being obedient. It’s not cowardly. But it’s not necessarily courageous either. I think a lot of us like to live here. We want to play it safe. The problem is – and we know this, Orpah’s safe choice excludes her from a covenant relationship with God. It turns out the stakes were much higher than she knew.

Orpah makes this responsible, safe, obedient decision and she goes back to what’s familiar. But Ruth chooses extraordinary courage. She clings to Naomi. That’s not an image of a scared child clinging to her mother’s leg. It’s most commonly used in the Old Testament to mean sticking together. It’s even used in Genesis to talk about a man leaving his father and mother and joining to his wife. Ruth is being courageously loyal.

¹⁵ “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

¹⁶ But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Look at Ruth’s words.

Where you go, I will go – She says I’m coming with you

Where you stay, I will stay – She says and even after we get there, I still won’t leave you.

Where you die, I will die – She says, not only am I coming with you, not only am I staying with you, but I’m also not just going to be waiting for you to die. Right? Naomi is much older than Ruth and Ruth is saying, “Hey... I’m not going to be waiting and hoping for you to die just so I can go back home to my family and my people and my culture... this is it for me. Even after you die... I’m staying in Bethlehem.

She says and there I will be buried – it was according to custom and culture that you would be buried with your family. Ruth says even after I die, I’m staying by your side.

And then Ruth seals it in blood, so to speak, she makes a covenant and invokes the personal name of the Hebrew God. She says, “May Yahweh deal with me, be it ever so severely if even death separates you and me.”

We begin to see characteristics of courage emerging and I think we can identify some stark differences between godly courage and worldly courage and as we point out the difference I think you’ll see the gulf between real godly courage and what we might call stupidity or worldly courage.

Biblical courage	Worldly courage
Seeks to <u>please</u> God	Seeks praise, profit, or self preservation
When Ruth clings to Naomi, she’s not doing it out of self-preservation and she’s not seeking praise and she knows there’s no profit. Courage for self-serving purposes isn’t biblical courage. When Elimelek left Bethlehem in order to find food for himself and his family... he wasn’t making a courageous choice. He was making what he thought was a sensible choice for the sake of preserving his life and his family’s life. When Evel Knievel jumped 14 greyhound buses, he’s not portraying biblical courage – he’s seeking glory. Biblical courage seeks to please God above all else. Worldly courage is self-serving.	
Thoughtful - considers principles and consequences	Impulsive - acts in spite of consequences and principles
Ruth is urged three times to leave, each time she knows what she’s doing and why she’s doing it. She’s unwavering. When she tells Naomi just how serious she is, it’s clear that she’s thought out her whole choice. She’s not undecided. She’s not thinking, “maybe I’ll check out Bethlehem and make up my mind once I get there.” Biblical courage is thoughtful. It considers principles and consequences. Worldly courage is impulsive, it acts in spite of consequences and is often times unprincipled.	
True sacrifice	False sacrifice
Ruth doesn’t expect to gain anything by this decision. She’s willing to accept a true sacrifice. Meaning that she’ll accept a negative sum outcome in order to do what’s most right and most loving. She will give up her family, give up her culture, give up her culture’s religion, and give up the safety and security that a man would provide. Later on in the story we find out that Ruth not only had a mother but also a father to return to and yet she’s sticking with Naomi. Worldly courage is false sacrifice. It’s willing to accept a negative outcome only if there is enough reward somewhere else to make it worthwhile. Worldly courage takes risks but only if the reward is worth it. It’s calculated sacrifice.	

I'm not saying that biblical courage will always result in a negative sum outcome. Actually, I think that's extremely rare. We serve a just and fair God who makes all things work together for the good of those who are called according to his purpose. And as we read in the book of Ruth, we see that God rewards Ruth's courage with far more than she ever could've imagined. I'm saying that biblical courage is willing to accept a negative outcome. It's fully surrendered to God and isn't asking the question, "what's in it for me?"

Driven by righteousness

Driven by pride and greed

In chapter 2 Ruth courageously sets out to glean grain from fields. It was an accepted practice in Israel to go through a field after it had been harvested and pick the leftovers. It comes from Leviticus 23:22 so it was a part of the Law.

"When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. Leave it for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the LORD your God."

And there was some grey area involved in this law. It's quite possible that some would take advantage of this charitable situation and take more than they ought to. For example: Workers at that time would commonly cut stalks of crop, lay them down in a pile and another worker following them would tie the bundle. Then, at the end of the harvest... all the bundles would be collected. Almost like an ancient assembly line. Each process being done in it's time. And some who were gleaning or scavenging after the workers could abuse the system by scavenging right at harvest time, by following close behind the workers, and by scavenging really close to these untied piles. So in these conditions workers could be protective of their crops and their hard work.

And not only does Ruth want to glean during harvest but she specifically asks to do it by these piles.

Chapter 2 verse 7 says "7 She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' "

Not only is she courageously going to these fields but she's courageously asking for more than the law requires – most probably so that she can get enough for Naomi as well.

The farm is owned by a man name Boaz. I always picture Boaz to look like Liam Neeson for some reason. Am I the only one? Boaz gives Ruth everything she asks for and more. He tells her to drink the men's water. He gives her protection. He gives her permission to do just as she's asked. He tells her to stay with the women that work for him. And Ruth courageously asks him, "Why are you doing all of this for me?"

His response is in verses 11-12 and he says "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. ¹² May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

And In **chapter 3:11** Boaz says to Ruth, “All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character.” You know **Proverbs 31**, where it says, “A wife of noble character, who can find?” That’s the same language here. Ruth is the only one in all of scripture to receive this designation. And she’s not even Jewish. Proverbs was very serious when it said, “where can we find such a woman?” And what sets her apart? It’s her courage.

Ruth’s reputation for righteousness, for noble character has preceded her. You see, Ruth’s courage is driven by righteousness – a desire to do what is right, no matter the cost. Godly courage is driven by a sense of righteousness. And we might nod our heads at that but it means if we’re going to live courageously, then we need to be principled. We must know where we stand and we must know why we stand where we stand. We have to have a strong sense of morality. Of right and wrong. I don’t think that’s a popular notion in our culture today and as a result, I don’t think there’s a lot of biblical courage out there right now.

Worldly courage on the other hand is most often driven by pride and greed.

We don’t have enough time to look at the whole life of Ruth and see all of the times that she was courageous. I do want to point out that she’s an ordinary person choosing extraordinary acts of courage even when she doesn’t have to. Even when there are more reasonable options. She will eventually propose to Boaz and this too will be a huge act of courage. **Boaz and Ruth** end up having a son together who becomes the grandfather of King David who is an ancestor of Jesus. Naomi left Bethlehem full, she returned empty, and it’s in Bethlehem where she is filled again. Ruth is given a husband and a child and she’s given a place in the family tree of the Messiah and all of this would’ve been an enormous reward. Beyond anyone’s wildest expectations.

We said before that Orpah’s safe choice excludes her from a covenant relationship with God. Ruth’s courage causes her to be a crucial component to God’s plan.

And the narrator never mentions miracles or divine intervention. It’s simply the providence of God working gently behind the scenes – made possible by the actions and choices of a truly courageous woman. And it has to make us go – what is God capable of doing through me if I stop letting fear dictate my choices and I start choosing extraordinary courage in everyday life.

I’ve got something I want to show you. ([Play video](#))

This... an ordinary man, afraid to take risks, playing it safe, finally decides to be bold. **There’s a TIME life magazine cover in the background** with his face on it in one of the scenes and the title of it is “The Making of a Brave Man.” If this is the picture you have in mind of what we’re talking about, you’ve missed the point. I don’t want to motivate you to live the most adventurous life possible and take dramatic risks for the sake of huge payoff. This isn’t a motivational speech where I want you to leave feeling like you can conquer the world and turn all your troubles around and get the girl of your dreams.

So I think the next question is obvious – What does godly courage in our everyday life look like? And that’s what this whole series is about – taking these fundamental character building blocks and saying “let’s grow in these as a church in our everyday life.”

Robert Biswas-Diener the author and expert on courage who we talked about before said that “I think courage is synonymous with the good life. Fears are all very normal and rational, but fear holds us back from actions that would make life rich and rewarding. People who live a fully engaged life are exhibiting some measure of courage. Courage indicates a willingness to try.”

You need courage to live a wholehearted life! To be vulnerable, to take action, to not let fear rule you. There’s no way to live the abundant life Jesus offers without embracing courage.

When we think about courage as something for the extreme moments, we do ourselves and our lives a disservice. There’s courage to be found in everyday moments.

The courage to have a hard conversation. The courage to be honest. The courage to reveal our hearts, our desires and our struggles. It takes courage to admit when something is hard. It takes courage to say, “I need help parenting.” It takes courage to say, “I’m sorry.” It takes courage to invest in relationships that might not pan out. It takes courage to reach out to someone who looks like they might benefit from your help.

For Ruth, it took courage to undo the sins of her father-in-law. To bring the family back to Bethlehem even though they had chosen to come to Moab. What sins in your family have been passed down to you that need to be addressed and undone and no longer excused? **Do you have the courage to undo the sins of your family?**

It took Courage for Ruth to leave Moab even though it’s where she was from and where her father in law brought his family. What things in your life need to be left behind? There’s unknown when it comes to giving up sin, giving up habits, letting go of a bad relationship... **it takes courage to end what’s familiar.** It takes courage to say, “I’m an addict. I need help. I’ve been making bad choices.”

It took Courage for Ruth to stay. To stay faithful in the midst of suffering the loss of her husband. To stay faithful even though her mother-in-law was doubting God’s love. Can you imagine for a moment... Ruth is a Moabite who has converted to Judaism and the people that taught her about God are either dead or seriously doubting. Yet she stays faithful to Yahweh and swears her allegiance to Naomi, Naomi’s God and Naomi’s people. Guys it takes courage to stay faithful when our mentors are failing us. It takes **courage to stay faithful** when our spiritual mentors are failing us. **It takes courage to stay faithful** when we’re suffering.

It took courage for Ruth to get involved. Her ties with Naomi were severed but she chose to cling. She chose to insert herself into Naomi’s life and make her problems her own. If we’re honest – It takes us courage to get involved too. It takes courage to see someone who needs help and for us to say, “hey, you don’t know me... but I want to help you if you’ll let me.” **It takes courage to insert ourselves into someone else’s business** and offer to make it our own.

I think this one is huge. It takes courage to hope. As soon as Ruth gets to Bethlehem, the only thing Naomi can do is tell people of her misfortune and hang her head. The first thing out of her mouth when she sees her friends and neighbors after 10 years of being gone is:

²⁰ “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back

empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

But look at Ruth’s first words in Bethlehem - She says,

““Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor.”

She’s counting on favor. She’s counting on hope. She’s moving ahead.

It’s one thing to say that we have hope – that doesn’t take courage. But truly having hope means taking action according to that hope. You might say you have hope in an eternity where everything you could ever want or need is in full supply. But are you living today as if that hope is a reality? **It takes courage to live according to the hope and truth of Christianity.**

This one is the most important. **It takes courage to love.** Ruth and Naomi and Orpah loved each other so deeply that they wept aloud multiple times at the thought of leaving one another. Ruth loved her mother in law and Yahweh so much that she gave up everything to go to Bethlehem. Ruth also had the courage to love Boaz. To place herself in another man’s care even though it didn’t work out the last time. Even though her father in law and husband had failed to provide. Love takes an enormous amount of courage. Opening ourselves up to others, having the courage to care deeply for others. This is everyday life stuff and yet it can be uncommon and extraordinary if we allow it to be.

What we see in Ruth is **purposeful courage** – courage that seeks to please God above all else. As a result it’s thoughtful, it’s truly sacrificial, and it’s driven by righteousness. And this is the only kind of courage that will allow us to live the Unshakable Life we’ve been talking about. Kingdom minded courage is the only courage that matters. As we practice courage this week, as we develop it, as we step out in boldness – it must be out of a desire to please God above all else.