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**Ruth 1:15–18 ESV**

*<sup>15</sup>And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." <sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and 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, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." <sup>18</sup>And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.*

**A Boy Named Suzie.**

My father loved dogs. All the while I was growing up, my parents owned a series of dog; sometimes they were more or less my mother's; sometimes, they were clearly my father's dogs - but he loved them all. My mother bought a black miniature poodle when I was a little boy and named her Suzie. Suzie died some years later and some years after that, she took in another stray poodle and fondly named it Suzie – despite this one being a boy. (I guess my mother forgot about the Johnny Cash song). My father would bring home strays, rather than buying pedigree dogs, or he got dogs from what we called the "Pound" back then. There was a German shepherd, a cocker spaniel mix, a mutt whose mix I couldn't possibly identify, and a couple of corgis. There was a time, when I was in grad school, when my parents did not own a single dog, which was very unusual for them. Then one day, my father noticed a stray that was hanging around

the neighborhood. The dog was some sort of special poodle breed, and I do remember my father saying that although he didn't care about such things, it was a purebred and was probably quite valuable to someone, and he said, it certainly was not used to surviving on its own. The dog was filthy, hungry, and scared. He washed and fed and watered it a few times, and then one day, he decided to follow it. Although I was no longer living with my parents, I happened to be visiting, so I went along with him. He was worried about the long-term care of the dog and he also wondered just who the owner was. He tracked it to a house a few blocks over. The dog went to a sliding glass door on the side of the house. My father and I went up to that door and looked in – and saw an elderly woman who had clearly passed away some days before. I'll get back to this. Consider this passage from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 12:

*<sup>4</sup>“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. <sup>5</sup>But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! <sup>6</sup>Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. <sup>7</sup>Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

I like this passage because it captures the way my father felt about animals. *Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God.* Jesus is in the middle of his ministry, on his way to Jerusalem. There is an interesting line in this passage that says: *But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.* The Greek word that is translated as “hell” is the word

*Gehenna*; it is badly mistranslated: in truth it refers to an area southwest of Jerusalem. It's not the Greek word *Hades*, which is often translated as Hell. *Gehenna* is a proper noun, a place in Israel. There are multiple theories about this name appearing in this passage. Many have claimed that *Gehenna* was a place where garbage was dumped. The trash there would burn day and night, some scholars say, with the fire never going out. It stank horribly, they tell us. Following this logic, Luke's statement refers to our need to avoid sin that can truly destroy our souls - i.e., turn them into garbage. Other researchers say that this theory about *Gehenna* being a garbage dump is not rooted in true history, that specifically, there is no archeological evidence of a dump ever being there, and that no one ever made this claim until a thousand or so years after Jesus lived. These other scholars say that the word *Gehenna* is related to the Hebrew word *Hinnom*, which is a valley where pagans, in Old Testament times, would sacrifice children by burning them. This would suggest that Luke used the word *Gehenna* as a way of saying that there is something much worse than being killed, and that is having your soul metaphorically be sacrificed by pagans.

The bottom line is this: the passage is dual in nature and is very powerful. It says that we should be concerned with what God thinks of us, and how we dedicate our lives on Earth to serving God. And yes, God can punish, and we should remember this. But as I pointed out in a previous message, Old

Testament fear isn't like our notion of the word "fear" in modern English. Old Testament fear is a state of awe at the power of God. So, this passage says that while God can indeed cast us into a burning, stinking trash heap or hand us over to the pagans to burn in one of their grotesque rituals, God is not vengeful. God loves us, down to the tiniest detail of our beings. God wants only the best for us. Why - God loves little sparrows, so just imagine how much he loves us, given that we are made in his image. God gives us lives in the Kingdom of Heaven, here on earth, and for eternity – but we do have the opportunity to destroy ourselves, if we want. One thing that is often glossed over when people analyze this passage is that God loves all his creations, not just people. Sparrows are not made in his image, but he did make them, and he does love them. We have a God who deeply cares about all living things. This is a belief my father shared, and that is why he followed that stray dog.

Let's look at a second passage. It's from the book of Ruth. The Book of Ruth is one of the shortest books in the Bible and it is perhaps the easiest to read. It's just a story, and many have wondered how it came to be scriptural to Jews. I don't question this, however: it has a powerful moral story in it. The Book of Ruth is about a woman named Naomi, who along with her husband and two sons, leave their hometown of Bethlehem during a drought. Bethlehem means "*house of bread*", and this city was indeed a major grain producing area for Israel. So, when the drought came,

so did famine. The family goes to a non-Israelite area called Moab, a land filled with Gentile people that the Israelites saw as morally, culturally, and quite frankly, racially inferior. There, the two sons of Naomi marry Moabite women. But then Naomi's husband and two sons all die. Naomi is left in a foreign land with her two daughters-in-law. The three widows are now totally destitute. One of the daughters-in-law goes back to her family in Moab. But the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, decides that she will be loyal to her mother-in-law and honor the woman who raised her dead husband. Here is the passage, from the first Chapter of Ruth, with Naomi, the mother, speaking first:

*<sup>15</sup>And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."<sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and 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, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."<sup>18</sup>And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.*

Out of love for her mother-in-law, Ruth decides to go to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi. But Ruth, a woman from a pagan culture, knows in advance that the Israelites hate Moabites and that she, Ruth, is likely to never be able to marry again and that she will probably live in abject poverty in Bethlehem. Yet she is determined to protect and care for the mother of her dead husband, and so the two women travel to Bethlehem. As it turns out, the drought and the famine back in Bethlehem are over. And, amazingly, Ruth's beautiful character captures the heart of an Israelite man named Boaz. He marries

her and they have a long and beautiful life together. They have many children. In the story, we see that God rewards Ruth for her love and her courage. Here's something that makes the story particularly powerful. There is an amazingly beautiful twist at the end of this story. Ruth has children who are half gentile, something that Israelites looked down upon. But Ruth ends up an ancestor of both King David and Jesus. Yes, it turns out that the line of David, of which Jesus is a member, has in it a Moabite, a Gentile – that's someone like most of us. This further illustrates God's love and respect for all people, including Gentiles. By choosing to go with her mother-in-law back to Israel, so she can care for Naomi, Ruth, instead of ending up being hated, isolated, and poor, ends up wealthy, with a beautiful family – and she becomes the great grandmother of King David, an incredible, symbolic honor for Gentiles.

And here's yet something else interesting about the story. It is set during the time of the Judges, around 1100 B.C. This is before the time of the Kings, including David. However, the book of Ruth itself is thought to have been written perhaps six hundred years later, after the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon. What's intriguing is that it was only during this later period that the Israelites started to become snobby and somewhat racist in their beliefs, not during the time the story took place. The people of this later time, when the story was written, shunned outsiders who did not share their faith and their culture. It wasn't the people living during the time the story takes

place who were bigoted. The author of the story was probably using the tale of Ruth, which was set during a much, much earlier time, as a way of gently criticizing the people of his or her current day. By using the story to innocently accuse people in the past of being bigoted, the author was telling the people of the current time, in a non-confrontational way, that they need to be more open, that they need to love all people. The author points out that God loves everyone and rewards those who feel the same way as God. When understood from a full historical perspective, Ruth is a very compelling story about faith, courage, love - and equality.

But what does the story of Ruth have to do with my father and the valuable stray dog that was some kind of special poodle breed? It was - by the way - an apricot-colored poodle, and it was very pretty. My father of course contacted the cops when he found the woman. Her family was called. Her adult children came from out of state, as I remember. There was a daughter and a couple of sons, maybe. Importantly, the family as a whole hadn't been getting along for years, and they had had little contact with each other or with their mother. The three of them met with my father in our house. He had been taking care of the dog, and it was now living in our house. They were deeply touched by the fact that my father chose to care for a stray, and to follow it back to its home, to see what was going on with its owner. His love and his concern for all life, the dog and the woman alike, meant a lot to them. These younger

adults ended up coming back together as a family. I remember them being in our living room, their initially clumsy discussions growing warmer as they renewed their family ties. They ended up deciding that their mother, who was with God, was now happy.

But, as it turned out, none of these people had much money, yet they wanted to give my father a reward. My father said, no, no, you're young, save your money - all I did was give the dog some food. They decided as a group of siblings to offer my father the only thing they could: the very valuable dog. They told him he could sell it if he wanted, that it was worth thousands of dollars. This was back when my father earned about ten thousand dollars a year. That dog represented a good piece of cash to him. But my father told them that he would just keep it as a pet. He and my mother had grown to love it. I remember thinking well, you'd better keep it locked in the house. If this thing gets run over by a car or something, it's going to be one expensive accident.

In sum, in the Book of Ruth, Naomi follows her heart. She does what she thinks is right, with no other concern. Now, my father didn't take a physical risk like Naomi did. Taking care of that dog, following it to its owner, deciding to keep it as a pet, this didn't put my dad in harm's way. But it did show that he was simply concerned about doing what he knew was the right thing to do, that he was a kind, caring person – like Ruth. In the end, God rewarded Ruth. He also rewarded my father, with a very



expensive pet that did manage to live to an old age and not get run over by a car, in case you were wondering. But God also rewarded my father in another way – by bringing back together a family that had fallen apart. By the time they left our house to go deal with their mother’s house, they were getting along. They hugged my father and my mother. They lovingly said goodbye to the dog. My mother, who loved poodles, took to the dog amazingly, and it was the first time that my two parents truly owned a dog together, instead of having “his or hers” dogs. And of course, in keeping with her tradition, she named the poodle Suzie. Yes, the dog was a boy.

Finally, there’s a parallel between the story of the sparrows and the story of Ruth. The sparrow is used as an example of a seemingly meaningless, minor animal, small, highly prevalent back then, like now, and with a short lifespan – an animal that had no value as food or companionship. And that dog that my dad took care of, well, it was just a dog. Society didn’t expect my father to take care of it; nor did he expect to get any benefit out of doing so. Ruth was a Moabite, a Gentile, a poor woman who was a young widow with no foreseeable way to a better future. Those sparrows, that high end poodle, and Ruth, they all represent us. We’re just regular people, with no particular power in this world, but as it turns out, we mean as much to God as any other human, including very powerful ones. What God wants us to do is treat other people the same way God treats us. And that turns out to be the major lesson that Jesus came to Earth to convey.