

A time to respond, a time to return, a time to reflect

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this morning we're going to be starting a short new series on the Old Testament book of Ruth. If you have a Bible, please turn to that. If not, there are Bibles around the pews, and so the Book of Ruth Old Testament book lies between Judges and 1 Samuel.

Last week we heard briefly from 1 Samuel chapter 3, and at that period in history we're told that the word of the Lord was rare and there was no frequent vision.

A few generations before the kingdom were the events in the Book of Ruth. It's a brief account of a very ordinary family living in a particularly turbulent time in Israel's history.

The Book of Ruth is like a case study of the average Israelite, a story of a family living somewhere in the margins of history. Ordinary people living somewhere between great events and other significant people. The Book of Ruth.

If God is so extraordinary, why do our lives feel and look and seem so ordinary?

[1 : 3 6] You see, in the pages of the Bible, we can easily read extraordinary events, easily read about people of extraordinary faith. Yet, if you're anything like me, you feel like your own life of faith is rather slow and insignificant. Now, I imagine that we all need reminded that even for the prophets and the apostles, they had many ordinary days and weeks and years in between events.

And so, certainly for me and you, most of our days will be quite ordinary. This is what it's like in the Book of Ruth. Ordinary people, ordinary days.

Sometimes we get the wrong idea that God only works in the extraordinary things. Sometimes we think that when God moves, it will always be noticed. It will always be accompanied by fireworks and trumpet blasts. But that's not true. So, from the start, I want to say that while the characters in this book are actually very ordinary, like me and you, the main character in the Book of Ruth is not Naomi. It's not even Ruth, who the book is named after. And it's not Boaz.

You could say the main character in the Book of Ruth is God's providence. Yahweh himself is the main character, but not in the same way that he is in the Book of Exodus, that many of us have heard about. And so, the Book of Ruth is a lesson in the unseen and unnoticed ways that God works things together for his purposes and for the good of those who love him. It's a lesson to trust that God is active every bit as much in the ordinary things as he is in the extraordinary things. And so, I hope that this short series in the book of Ruth will help each one of us to see that God is always working, and that God is always working in the ordinary, and that God is always working out his promises every single day, even today, in many unnoticed ways.

The first chapter that we're going to be dealing with today has three main sections to it. And what I'm going to do, instead of reading the whole thing first, I'll read one section at a time, and then I'll speak on that as we go through. And so, the first section from verses 1 to 5 tells us that when things are bad, it's time to respond. But things often go from bad to worse. And so, let me read verses 1 to 5.

[4 : 46] In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife was Naomi. The names of his two sons were Malon and Kilion.

They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died. She was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives.

The name of one was Orpah, the name of the other, Ruth. They lived there about ten years. And both Malon and Kilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

This is a time to respond. Firstly, at this point in history, it goes from bad to worse for the nation of Israel. And then secondly, it goes from bad to worse for an ordinary family of Israelites. Firstly, for the nation, we read in verse 1, it was in the days when the judges ruled.

This is not a neutral time, and it's not a good time. In fact, if you flip over the page, the very last words of the book of Judges, the page before, there are two connected problems. You can see it right in the very last words of the book of Judges. Problem number one, in those days, there was no king in Israel. And problem number two, everyone did what was right in his own eyes. And so the situation is already bad in the promised land, and it's about to go from bad to worse. Verse 1 of Ruth 1, we have problem number three, and there was a famine in the land. This is in the promised land, a famine in the promised land. Things have gone from bad to worse for the nation. There was no king in the promised land. God's people were doing whatever they wanted in the promised land, and now there is a famine in the promised land. On top of that, some of God's people were choosing to leave the promised land.

[7 : 18] This should have been a time for the nation to respond, but things just go from bad to worse. Now, what does that look like for an ordinary family? Well, here is Elimelech and Naomi. They are living in the promised land without a king, people doing what is right in their own eyes, and now there is no harvest. This is not the good life. Ironically, Naomi's name means pleasant, but this famine threatened her life from being pleasant. And her husband's name, Elimelech, means God as king. El-eh-melech. El meaning God and melech meaning king. This shows the irony of the problem. God was their king. He was always meant to be their king, and Elimelech's name testifies to that. But because there's no human king, no visible king, the people, including this family, including Elimelech, did what was right in their own eyes. And so this is also a time for ordinary people to respond. But this family, the way they respond is they decide to leave the promised land. This is no small decision for an Israelite. Furthermore, they don't just leave to go anywhere. They go to a nation that has been a thorn and an enemy to Israel. Just in their recent history, in Judges chapter 3, we see that the king of Moab had enslaved Israel for 18 years, right in the heart of the promised land, until eventually the people respond by crying out to God. Moab's not a good place to go if you're an

Israelite. And so two things to note. Moab was not a neutral destination. It was a nation that had enslaved Israel in their recent history. And we learn elsewhere that the primary god for Moab, Chemosh, was worshipped by child sacrifice. This is not a good place to go.

Going to Moab might have seemed right in the eyes of Elimelech, but everything in Israel's history warned against going to such a place. And secondly, when things go wrong in the heart of the promised land, given that God specifically brought Israel to this land and gave it to them, it's not out of God's control. When things go wrong in the promised land, it's usually a warning signal for the people to turn back to God from their wayward ways and to cry out to God. And this is what happened in Judges chapter 3, although it took them 18 years to respond. And so the response when famine struck should not have been to leave the promised land, but rather to cry out to God and repent if you've turned from Him. Now, we don't know the prior history of this family, but the famine is at least a signal that nationally Israel have turned from God. The famine was a sign of what Moses said long ago in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. If the nation disobeyed God and turned from Him, the heavens and earth would become like iron and bronze. They would get famine instead of fruit. There's a lesson there not to presume on God's gracious provision. You see, did the nation think that the fruit just came from the land?

As if the fruit only comes purely from the land and not from God? Did they think that as long as they were in the land, it didn't matter how they lived? Sometimes, as people, every one of us, as human beings, sometimes we want the benefits from God, but not their relationship with God. Sometimes we want His provision, but not His person.

You see, it's not just about land and crops. It's about life and death. How do you respond? This family moved to Moab, and they move there expecting to find life there, but all they end up finding is death upon death. And the text doesn't necessarily say if these deaths are a result of the move, but the biblical principle we're supposed to understand is that outside of God, there's just no life. There's no life outside of God. It's not that the promised land gave them life. Clearly, there was famine. It's not the promised land. It's the promise of God. That's what the land represented, the promise and provision of God, as life. But that's not separate from the person of God.

[12 : 07] And so, just before the nation entered the promised land, way back, just before they entered, Moses said in Deuteronomy 30 that he sets before them life and death. And he told them, choose life, love and obey God, for He is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that God promised. And so, Moses laid this out way back when they first went there. Here is life and here is death. Choose life, and that means choosing Yahweh, choosing God, who is your life.

But at this time, and it's a difficult decision, but the family chooses Moab and expects to find life, but all they find is death. You see, the world out there cannot give you what only God can give you.

God's provision is His person. That's why in the Apostle John's first letter in 1 John 5, he writes, God gave us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life.

Whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. You see, there's no life outside of God. There's no life outside of Christ and the end. This move to Moab is just a picture of that.

Outside of the promise of God, there's no life. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1.20, all the promises of God find their yes in Christ. But even when we fail to respond, even when things go from bad to worse, God is still working. God is still at work trying to get our attention. Sometimes it may be to warn us, to wake us up out of our stupor, and to turn back to Him. And so, for instance, are we not grateful for the little warning signs in our cars, if we have them?

[14 : 09] Something we all have is a body. Are we not grateful for the warning signs in our body? What would happen if we didn't respond to these warning signs? What would happen if you got a warning sign in your body and you just chose not to respond to it? Well, we know what would happen.

It wouldn't go well for us. Now, you've heard the saying, fight or flight. I wonder if the common response to God's warning is either repent or run. It doesn't mean it's going to be easy, but I wonder what I would have done. So, I've got two boys. I've got a wife and two boys. What would I have done if famine struck and I had mouths to feed? Perhaps a limelight reasoned? It's only for a short time. It's only to get us by. We'll go back when things get better. The problem is, turning away from the land of God's promise only ended up with death. Holding on to God's promise isn't easy, is it? It's not easy to hold on to God's promise. But do we think that we're going to get anything any easier anywhere else?

How do we think it's going to go outside of God's promise? It may be more comfortable for a while. If you've ever seen Braveheart, you'll remember that speech where William Wallace says, go home and live for a while. But in the end, what's it going to be like?

The outcome in the end will prove fatal outside of God's promise. There's no life outside of Christ, and Peter knew this in John chapter 6 when many people were turning away from Jesus.

Many people turned away from him. Jesus turned to the twelve and said, do you want to leave as well? And Peter says, well, Lord, to whom would we go? Where are we going to go? You have the words of eternal life. You're the Holy One of God. There's no one else. And so perhaps someone here is feeling the pain and the pressure. Perhaps you're feeling the temptation to turn away from the promised land, so to speak, whatever that is. Don't leave Bethlehem. Don't think that you're going to get it any easier in Moab. Whatever that means to you, don't do it. There's no provision outside of Christ.

[16 : 41] There's no life. Even if it brings comfort for ten years, it will only bring sorrow for ten thousand. But what do you do if you've already done that? What do you do if you've found yourself in a place of making bad choices and things have gone from bad to worse? What do we do?

Well, I think the lesson from this is you return. You return. Turn back to God. The dominant word in this chapter is the Hebrew word for return. Twelve times it says it. Turn back to God.

Don't think that he has forgotten you. Don't think that he's left you behind. He's still at work trying to get you to return. And here's the wonderful thing about God. He absolutely loves to forgive the sinner. He loves it. He's always ready. He loves to welcome back the wanderer.

He loves to give hope to the hopeless. He loves to heal the broken, and he loves to give life to the dead. Before you even decide to return, God has already been at work ensuring that there is a way.

God has made a way. How do I know that? The cross. Romans 5.8 says, God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Yeah? He has made a way to return before we even think about returning. So good. God has your return worked out for you before you even think about it. And so that leads us to the next section, a time to return. Let me read from verses 6 to 18.

[18 : 29] And so, with the death of her husband and her two sons, then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices, and they wept. And they said to her, No, we will return with you to your people. But Naomi said, Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters. Go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should be her sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it's exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. Then they lifted up their voices and wept again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law. But Ruth clung to her, and she said,

See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law. 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.

Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said, No more. Now, was it a coincidence that Naomi heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food? Was that a coincidence? Was it an accident that she had heard that? Do you think that God was doing this thing over there in Bethlehem, but he was completely unconcerned about what Naomi was doing in Moab?

Now, I wonder if you've experienced this. Have you ever heard about a party or an event? Have you ever heard about something that you weren't invited to, but you've heard that there's something going on over there, and you didn't get an invite? How do you think the host would feel if you turned up, yet you weren't invited? And they thought, Well, I didn't invite you. You're not welcome here.

Do you think that God didn't want Naomi to know about these things in Bethlehem? Do you think he would be angry at the people for letting slip in the fields of Moab? Because he didn't want Naomi to be at the party. Yeah, God's overdoing his own thing, but she's went to Moab. Too bad for her.

[21 : 49] I think it's safe to infer that God wanted Naomi to find out about the turn of events back home. I think it's very safe to infer that in God's providence, these whispers in the field of Moab were supposed to beckon Naomi to return. Now, if you don't feel particularly close to God at any time, or even now, if there's stuff you perhaps have to work out with God, if you're wondering how He feels towards you, have a think for a moment if there's anything you've seen or heard, any little things that may be just like a whisper in the field, but enough that it may be actually God beckoning you to return.

Perhaps this morning is that field. Certainly none of us are here by accident this morning. Will we respond to the whispers of the good news of God's grace? Will we respond? Because let me tell you, God means for us to hear about His good news. God means for us to hear about His grace.

Psalm 145 reminds us of the character of God. He's not just some angry, impatient God, always needing appeased. Psalm 145 reminds us He is gracious and merciful. He's slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Romans 2, 21 says God is rich in kindness and forbearance and patience, and it's actually His kindness that's supposed to lead us to repentance. Isn't that such good news?

Kindness is another word that is highlighted in the book of Ruth. It's the Hebrew word *hesed*. It's used of God's character throughout the entire Bible, something that Naomi feels that she will no longer experience. Have you ever got to a point in your walk where you think, I've blown it. I am no longer going to experience God's kindness. I just don't deserve it. And we know we don't deserve it. Sometimes we get to a point where we think, I'm not going to experience this anymore, am I? It's run out. And she prays for her daughters-in-law that they might experience the Lord's *hesed*. But she feels like it's run out for her. She feels like it's over. God not only has *hesed* by nature. His character, his own revelation says that he is abounding in *hesed*, in kindness, in loyal love, steadfast love. Translators have struggled to convey the meaning of *hesed* in one word in English. And so the author and songwriter Michael Carr describes *hesed* as, when the person from whom I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything.

God does that by nature. And he doesn't have just a little bit. He is absolutely abounding, overflowing, absolutely bursting with loving kindness. Think of Psalm 136. Every single line of that Psalm says his *hesed* endures forever. You know it, for his steadfast love endures forever.

[25 : 20] So it's not like God's done with Naomi. God's not done with you, and God's not done with me. It's not like he would be disappointed if Naomi heard about his favor. It's not like he doesn't want to invite her to the party. The whispers in the field of Moab is part of God's providence to beckon his people back. And even though she feels like she should spend the rest of her days in poverty, think of the story of the prodigal son. You see, he thought that maybe, just maybe, he would be accepted back as a slave. But the father has other ideas.

God is abounding in loving kindness. He delights in welcoming back the wanderer and the lost. And let me tell you something about God. God is not interested in gathering for himself slaves.

He is looking for sons and daughters. If you need to return, then it's time to return. Know that God has already made a way to return, and that he delights in it. He's abounding in steadfast love towards you and me. He has made the whispers of his *hesed* reach your ears, so that you would stop from running to him and start running towards him.

I need to be reminded of that when I'm tempted to turn away. It's not just Naomi. It's not just insiders. Because here we see Ruth, a woman from Moab, a place that was not good, not godly, not a very moral place, a place that was not offering life.

Even in their worship, they were offering the death of children. You see, Naomi doesn't have much hope for destitute widows, especially foreign widows in the land of Bethlehem. So she tries to put her daughters-in-law off. She tries to send them back to their homes and to their gods. But there was something stopping Ruth, something stopping Ruth from wanting anything more to do with Moab and their gods. There was something in Naomi, something in the promised land, something in Yahweh, the god of promise, that Ruth wanted to choose. Perhaps the death of her husband and his brother and his dad only reminded Ruth that in Moab you could only find death. But Yahweh can offer life. And we see that even when she states the name of Yahweh. She takes hold of his name. Do you know that God offers you life? After all, he's the source of life and all that exists. Where do you get your breath from? Acts 17, he gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. Colossians 1 says, by Jesus, all things were created, and in him all things hold together. John 5 says, the Son gives life to whom he will because the Son has life in himself.

[28 : 24] God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. There's salvation in no other name. And so we see that it's not too late for Naomi, not too late for Naomi to return. But more incredibly, we also see Ruth, a Moabite woman, choosing to go to Israel because God's promise can give what the world can never give. God not only welcomes back those who have wandered from him, he welcomes those who never knew him. God doesn't have favorites. He's not partial. His love is greater than we know and extends farther than we can imagine. And so we see that it's not too late.

If you've been turning elsewhere in a time of need, then it's time to return to God. If we're tempted to turn elsewhere in a time of need, don't do it. Turn to God. And if you've ever taken hold of his promise before, if you've never taken hold of his promise before, sorry, then it's time to turn to God. He has already made a way, and that way is Jesus. And I remember before I ever knew God, he spoke to me of that way, and it took me a long time to notice it. Every time I walked past a wee church in big bold print in the wall outside, it says, Jesus says, I am the way. And I used to mock it until God broke into my life. Jesus says, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. That sounds exclusive, and it is, but it also means that through him you actually can come to God. Hallelujah. And so finally, it's a time to reflect. The last part, a time to reflect. Let me read from verse 19. And so the two of them went on until they came to

Bethlehem, and when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the woman said, is this Naomi? She said to them, don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab, and they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Notice how the whole town was stirred, and notice how people were saying, is this Naomi? Naomi, sometimes we don't do things that we should do because we're worried about what people will think and what people will say. Is that not true? Naomi, you've changed. Is that really you?

[31 : 34] I'm sorry, Jen. I was speaking to Jen the other day, and I mentioned a celebrity by name, and she asked which one. She said there's two celebrities with that name, which I didn't know.

I thought there was only one. Turns out there is only one. But Jen had known this celebrity by their older work and by what they looked like a while back, and when she'd seen later pictures, she thought it was a different celebrity with the same name, but it's the same person. People can look very different a decade later. Some people from my old life wouldn't picture me as a pastor.

We can let what people think or say dictate what we do, can't we? I imagine Naomi would have anticipated all the way back to Bethlehem. She would have anticipated what people might say.

It might have put her off. It might have made it a lot more difficult than we realize for her to return, because she would have known that people would talk. Yeah, oh, how did that work out for you, Naomi? Look at you now, destitute, no husband, no sons. How's that go for you? Why did you go to Moab when we were all staying here? People would talk. People would think.

It could have stopped her from returning, but it didn't. Similarly, Ruth. Ruth could have worried about what her old family and friends in Moab would think, what they would say about her going off to a foreign nation to Israel to worship their God. Imagine that would have stopped them from going.

[33 : 16] As we go through, and if you know the story, God's providence is all over this, and what it results in is something incredible, out of something ordinary birthed something extraordinary.

And so, while we may reflect what people may think or say, let us also reflect what their opinions are worth compared with what choosing Christ might be worth. Make your choice based on that, because the opinions of others are not worth very much in the end. And so then, when Naomi replies to these comments for others, she thinks about what she had and what she now doesn't have, and she says, I went away full. The Lord has returned me empty.

And so, this might be a time to reflect on our understanding of what it is to be full and what it is to be empty. This is one of the things that I found when I first encountered God.

Unlike Naomi, I was not at a point of crisis or rock bottom when I first encountered God. I felt like I had everything I wanted in life. I felt like I lacked nothing. But when I encountered God, I found that all these things in my life were actually pretty empty. You see, we can have a mixed up idea of what full is and what empty is.

I thought I was full, but I was empty. And I thank God that He didn't need to break me for me to find out. He just lifted the lid and showed me that I was empty. And then Jesus filled me.

[35 : 02] Sometimes I still need to be reminded that it is Jesus who fills us. Sometimes I look over here or there. Jesus said in John 6, The words that I have spoken to you are full of spirit and life.

And He said in John 10, Well, the thief only comes to steal and kill and destroy, but I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it in all its fullness. If anyone's going to fill us, it's Jesus.

So what do we think makes us full, and what do we think is empty? And finally, she has this idea that the Lord has brought calamity upon her.

Do we blame God when life doesn't go well? Do we blame God when we turn elsewhere and we don't experience life? Can we blame God if we look elsewhere and only find death?

Can we blame God for that? We find it easy to be angry about it. We find it easy. But the question is, has God really brought calamity upon her?

[36 : 08] Actually, what the Lord has brought is He has brought her back. That's what the Lord has brought. If He's brought anything, the Lord has brought her back.

He's been working in her situation all along to bring her back. And not her alone, but with her daughter-in-law. You see, we don't always see or notice the ways God is working.

But we should learn from this, that God is working in the everyday, ordinary things to bring about His purposes. One final thing.

This story begins with no crown in the promised land and no crop in the house of bread. But Lechem, Bethlehem, the house of bread. There's no crown in the promised land and there's no crop in the house of bread.

This chapter now ends with a crop and the book will end with a crown. God is at work. Yet it's through the ordinary and unnoticed things.

[37 : 12] The little things that happen to happen. Things that seem left to chance, like an accident or coincidence, but turn out to be the very providence of God, working both for the nation and the individual.

Because you can rely on the promise of God, whether it's for a nation or whether it's for a person. So when it's a time to respond, look to God rather than Moab.

Look to Christ rather than the world. When it's a time to return, know that God has already made a way for you to return. And that way is through His Son, Jesus. And when it's a time to reflect, look for the signs of God's providence, even when you feel empty.

And may you know where it is to feel the fullness of the life of Christ. Amen. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for this record that you've ensured has reached our ears.

It is about you and your goodness and your grace, your promise and your providence. Help us to know these things in Christ. And help us to find our fullness in Christ, your Son.

[38 : 23] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen.