

The journey

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[0 : 00] Ruth chapter 1, which you'll find up on the screen. We'll read the whole chapter.

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.

The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Malon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah, and they went to Moab and lived there.

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

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she'd been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

[1 : 21] 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.

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, and said to her, We will go back with you to your people.

But Naomi said, Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters. I am too old to have another husband.

Even if I thought there was still hope for me, even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons, would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters.

It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me. At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

[2 : 20] Look, said Naomi, Your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her. 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. 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. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, Can this be Naomi? Don't call me Naomi, she told them.

Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me.

[3 : 23] The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Amen. This is God's word for us. So we're beginning a short study in the book of Ruth, and today we're thinking about the journey or the journeys that we see Naomi's family in particular make.

And I hope that it will help us as we reflect on the journey of life that we are all on, the journey of faith that many of us are on.

What we see in our story today are probably some realities that we recognize. Sometimes in our lives, in our stories, we come to what we might call crossroads moments.

We have important decisions to make, perhaps about the place where we'll live, the job that we might take, an opportunity to pursue or not, a decision that will shape our lives moving forward.

[4 : 33] It makes me think of the poem by Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken, and that last verse, which perhaps we find ourselves at times resonating with.

He says this, I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence. Two roads diverge in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.

So sometimes our life comes with decisions, and those decisions have consequences, and we see that in this story. But there are other times in our stories where life leaves us no choice, where circumstances come upon us, and if we're thinking about a journey, it's more like perhaps being in a kayak or a canoe, and we're hitting river rapids, and there's only one way we're going.

A journey, perhaps, that we wouldn't choose, a situation that we wouldn't desire, but it comes nevertheless. And we see that in this story too. For us, it comes in the form of illness, and loss, and redundancy, and breakup, and how we respond to those as they come across our paths.

So the story of Ruth and Naomi, I think is a really helpful one to reflect on at any time, helpful for us at the beginning of a year to remind us that wherever we find ourselves on the journey of life and faith, we need to recognize who our God is.

[6 : 02] We are presented in the book of Ruth with a God of sovereign grace, a God who is able to sustain, a God who is able to bring hope in the midst of suffering, a God of sovereign grace who's ready to seek and to save those outside of his kingdom, to bring them in, to extend his favor to them, a God who, despite difficult circumstances, continues to work out his plan of redemption, a God of sovereign mercy who's working all things for the good of his people, even when his providence is hard to bear and seems a bitter thing, as we see particularly in chapter 1.

So this evening we're going to follow the journeys in order to discover more in particular about our God. So first five verses, we can think about this as Naomi and her family being on the road to nowhere.

Verse 1 gives us a setting for our story. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.

So this is happening at the time of the judges, and this isn't simply giving us a date stamp. This is also reminding us of the theological description that's behind that, the spiritual circumstances that Israel is experiencing at this time.

In the very last sentence in the book of Judges, we read, in those days Israel had no king, everyone did as they saw fit.

[7 : 40] And to read the book of Judges is to come across this repeating pattern, sometimes called the judges cycle, where the people turn their back on God, perhaps they begin to worship other gods, and God brings judgment on the people, sometimes sending enemies to the land.

And after a number of years, the people repent, they cry out to God, God in his mercy sends them a deliverer, the deliverer comes and gives them peace for as long as his life lasts.

But then that cycle repeats again. Rebellion, disobedience, judgment, and so on. And by the end of the book of Judges, when we come out of the cycle, what we're left with is a picture of moral and social and political and religious chaos and disaster.

It is not a high point in the spiritual life of God's people. And we know that the story of Ruth begins at a low point in the people's spiritual journey because we're told there's a famine in the land.

And again, this famine is judgment from God because of the people's disobedience. So even as the story begins, it begins on this very dark backdrop.

[9 : 02] But it's going to allow the light of God's love and grace to shine really brightly in time in Naomi's family. And in fact, if we get to the end of the story, so if Judges ends, there was no king and everyone's doing as they see fit, by the end of the book of Ruth, we know that it's through Naomi and especially through Ruth's family that ultimately King David will come.

God's choice of a king, kingship, is the answer to the sin and rebellion among the people of God. And that, of course, prepares us for the coming of our great King Jesus.

So having introduced the time for us when this story happens, we're then introduced to a family. And especially, we can think about Elimelech, the head of this family, married to Naomi, two sons, Malon and Kilion.

And immediately, as we're introduced to them, we see that he is faced with a choice. As there is a famine in the land, he has two roads available to him. One, he can stay in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, which means house of bread, in the promised land. What Elimelech could do is he could, with his fellow countrymen, he could lament over their sin, over their turning their backs on God.

[10 : 27] He could return to God with faith and trust in God to provide. That's one road that's available to him. Or the other one is he can go to Moab.

Moab, where evidently there is no famine. Perhaps the grass seems greener on the other side there. And what we need to understand in Elimelech's case, this is not a neutral choice.

This isn't, well, the choices, I guess, that most of us have. Will we live in city A or city B? Will we take job A or job B? Unless there is sin involved, there's just a wisdom choice. It's neutral from that point of view.

But for Elimelech to leave Bethlehem and to head to Moab is going to show his rejection of God, living in God's place, living among God's people, choosing not to live by faith, but to make his own way in life outside of God's promised land.

And that's what he does. end of verse 2, they went to Moab and lived there. And we see the sadness that comes to the family of Elimelech.

[11 : 49] Well, first we're told in verse 3 that he dies. Then, having gone there apparently temporarily, we see that Naomi settles down with her sons.

Her sons marry Moabite women and after 10 years they also die too. Now, we need to remember as well that Moab was enemy territory.

In Deuteronomy 7, verse 3, the people of God were forbidden to marry, but yet here we find them settling down, establishing a family.

Elimelech's name means my God is, God is my king, but his name does not reveal his heart, does it? As he chooses his own way apart from God.

So, after that crossroads decision, after moving towards Moab, 10 years later, verse 5, we find Naomi's world falls apart.

[12 : 50] She has no husband, she has no sons, she finds herself relatively elderly, a stranger in a strange land, a widow without support or security.

This man's journey away from God, from God's place, from God's people, has led this family nowhere, so it seems.

Just to pause at this point and to think about this journey in relation to ours, I think it's helpful for us, a caution for us, when we think about Elimelech's decision making.

You know, the book of Proverbs, probably a verse that the junior church have learned at some point, trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding and all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.

Well, that's not the way of wisdom that Elimelech chooses. The Bible says that we are to walk by faith and not by sight, but Elimelech chooses to live by sight.

[13 : 56] I can see there's bread and more, so I'm heading there rather than trusting God. We thought this morning about Jesus using the book of Deuteronomy to resist temptation by saying man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, but Elimelech chooses bread alone.

And it's so important for us to reflect on how we make our decisions. Are we making our decisions based on trust in our God? Are we humbly depending on him or are we like Elimelech walking by sight and not by faith?

So his action stands as a warning for us, but there's also wonderful hope in this story because of the mercy of God, because of God's sovereign grace.

Yes, there is judgment that comes on Elimelech's family just as judgment was falling on all Israel because of their turning away from God, but also there is blessing.

Naomi, though she doesn't know it yet, will know much of God's grace and much of God's goodness and much of God's blessing, even though she is part of this foolish decision to walk away to Moab.

[15 : 16] And there is hope for us, I think, then when we pray for the prodigals in our own lives, for friends and family perhaps who at one time were in church professing faith but have now wandered away.

It's so helpful for us to remember the sovereign grace and mercy of God and his loving desire to save and to redeem. When we think about how God is presented in this book, we see here is a God who is in control over the nations and God who will send judgment on a nation but God who also controls the family life of Naomi, turning it for good, ultimately to show redeeming love.

And so we are encouraged to place our confidence in this God. This God who, in the midst of all the chaos, has a plan, a plan to establish Ruth's family and to establish David as king and to establish the line of King Jesus.

Just before we move from these verses, let's think about the gospel journey and think about the journey of Jesus and see how it compares with Elimelech.

So what do we see from Elimelech? We see him leaving his home, seeking his own blessing in disobedience to God. And I compare that with Jesus, leaving his home in glory for the blessing of his people, obeying God all the way to the cross.

[16 : 53] That the judgment that falls on Jesus becomes blessing for the people of God because of his faithfulness to God's word. So that was the road to nowhere.

But then in verse 6 to 17, we can think about the return journey, we can think about Naomi going home. And look at verse 6 to see what prompts her decision to return.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

So the Lord had come to the aid of his people. Bear in mind that this is in the time of the judges. This presumes that we're not told that the people of God have repented of sin, that they've looked to God for mercy, and God has shown mercy that is bread once again in the house of bread.

And so, Naomi recognizes the Lord's providence in this, and so she and Orpah and Ruth begin the return journey home.

[18 : 04] Well, of course, it's home for Naomi, it's not home for Orpah and Ruth. And at some point on this journey, having encouraged them to come with her, there is clearly a point where she begins to ask questions of, well, what's really best for my daughters-in-law?

How will I provide for them? What kind of welcome will they receive? Where are they most likely to find their security? And so, the journey pauses almost as quickly as it begins, and we come to another crossroads moment, this time for Orpah and for Ruth.

Because Naomi, in verse 8, said to her two daughters-in-law, go back, each of you, to your mother's home. She believes that those two young women will have better prospects, greater security in Moab with their families in the place that they know, the culture that they are familiar with.

Naomi says, I can't provide husbands for you, so I don't have any prospects to offer. Verse 9's an interesting one because it gives us an understanding of what is driving Naomi, what's Naomi's desire for Orpah and especially for Ruth.

May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. A home for Ruth with a husband who will care for her.

[19 : 31] That's her desire. Now what Naomi doesn't understand is that's also God's desire and God has a much better plan than Naomi's plan. Naomi's plan is go back to Moab and see what you can find there.

But God's going to bring Ruth back to Israel to meet Boaz. That God himself will provide a lasting home for Ruth among the people of God.

But if we put ourselves in Orpah and Ruth's shoes for a moment, I imagine you like me think, well Naomi's words seem fairly logical. To leave for another country with no one to provide for you, with the possibility of not receiving a warm welcome, you can imagine it might make sense to go back.

And so that's exactly what Orpah chooses. Verse 14 or verse 13 when Naomi says, it's, no my daughters it's more bitter for me than for you because the Lord's hand is turned against me.

At this they wept aloud again then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye. So Orpah chooses to return to Moab and at this point she disappears from the pages of the Bible.

[20 : 49] We don't know. Did she get married? Did she find that husband and that security? Did she raise a family? Was she happy in her life? We don't know. But even if all those things were true, even if she went home and found a husband and had a family and had a long and satisfying life, she has still turned back from life with God in God's place.

It seems that she has missed the ultimate and eternal blessing on offer to her in making that journey to identify herself among the people of God.

It seems that perhaps Naomi has lost sight of the reality that the greatest thing anyone can have. The greatest thing that Naomi could offer her daughters-in-law was an invitation to become part of the people of God, to know God and to know his love, to enjoy fellowship with the people of God.

There is no question that Naomi loved Orpah as she loved Ruth, but it seemed like she aims too low in her aspiration and desire for her daughter-in-law.

To have a happy marriage and a happy family without God is to miss the fullness that God has for any of us. So Orpah chooses at this moment of decision to go home, but what does it say about Ruth?

[22 : 20] In verse 14 we discover that Ruth clung to her and that's a significant word because it's the same word that appears in Genesis chapter 2 and verse 24.

It's a marriage word speaking about the marriage of Adam and Eve as a pattern for all marriages. That's why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife and they become one flesh.

There's so much covenant commitment language from Ruth and that continues in her speech in verse 16. Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.

Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay, your people will be my people and your God my God.

Words perhaps we hear fairly regularly at weddings. Even the pattern makes us think of for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, till death do us part.

[23 : 24] That's the idea behind Ruth's words. She is committing to her mother-in-law in undying love and not just committing herself to Naomi, but more significantly committing herself to Naomi's God.

Verse 17, May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.

Having said, your God will be my God, she then swears an oath before the Lord, using the covenant name of God, as her witness that she will remain with Naomi, that the people of God are her people.

Now what can we learn from this leg of the journey? Let's think some more about God's sovereign grace, let's think about what's happening in Israel.

God in his mercy is restoring wayward Israel, there's bread and not famine because of God's mercy. Naomi is being restored to the people of God by the mercy of God.

[24 : 41] For God's people, judgment is not and will never be God's last word. And we discover too that God's grace comes to an outsider, to a Moabite woman.

To many within Israel, this would be shocking. God's promise. But it's a reminder to us that God loves to save. That God's plan has always been a redemption that takes in the nations, surprising people, surprising places.

And again, it's an encouragement to us not to give up on people, not to give up on mission. God's arm is not short that he cannot save. God's faith.

It reminds us encouragingly, I think, that God works through weak faith. Because how is it that Ruth knows about the God of Israel? How does she know about this covenant keeping God?

Well, surely it's through her mother-in-law, Naomi. Naomi's faith is weak. She is, at the very least, wrestling with a sense of bitterness towards God, struggling to see God's kindness at any stage.

[25 : 59] She has walked away from the promised land, but still, Naomi's witness is used for Ruth's salvation. I am sure all of us, when it comes to our witness, feel a sense of our own weakness and inadequacy, feel that there are times when we fail and mess up.

Well, he is encouragement that God works through weak people so that he gets the glory, as he does in Ruth's story.

Ruth also shows us something of what faith involves, doesn't she? As Ruth begins this journey, this mark by suffering and sacrifice, this is a journey of faith that is costly to her, leaving all that she knows behind, moving towards a very uncertain future.

But she does it because she has committed herself to God. Jesus said, to follow him is to carry a cross.

The discipleship is not cheap and easy, it is costly. perhaps we have known something of that mockery or sense of isolation from people because of our faith.

[27 : 27] And we certainly know that some of our brothers and sisters in Christ are imprisoned, rejected by their families, will be facing death today because they have chosen to make God their God.

God and again when we put that into the story of the gospel, we are following Jesus who walked the way of the cross, who was for us the suffering servant, making that journey of humiliation for the sake of his people.

And as we seek to live by faith in him, he tells us that he both goes before us and is with us, giving us strength, sending us the spirit for our journeys of faith.

Well, let's look finally at a journey's end and what we can describe as a bitter return. I want to notice something that perhaps seems awkward or even painful in our text.

So we read verses 16 and 17, those wonderful lovely words of Ruth. She just poured out her heart to Naomi in this great expression of undying loyalty and love.

[28 : 59] These words that are used at weddings, you could easily imagine them being turned into a song or a poem. But how does Naomi respond? In our NIV it says, when Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

That could read, she was silent. Nothing to say in response. And we see more of that pain that Ruth might well have experienced when Naomi begins to share with the women of the village.

Don't call me Naomi, Naomi means pleasant. Call me Mara, which means bitter, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.

Ruth's standing right there. God's brought me back empty. There's certainly no sense in Naomi's word that she looks on her daughter-in-law as a source of comfort and blessing, a mercy that she went with her on this journey.

Naomi says, well, my name is pleasant, but that's not my experience. My experience at God's hand is one of bitterness. Verse 21, the Lord has afflicted me or the Lord has testified against me.

[30 : 32] I've been brought into the Lord's courtroom and the judgment has come and I'm under God's hand. I want us again to just see a word of caution here.

The danger of bitterness in our lives. That bitterness can mean we miss the blessings, the kindness that God shows.

So what's clear in this whole chapter is that Naomi absolutely believes in a God who is sovereign, who is in control, but all she can see is his judgment.

And at this stage in her life, she's unable to see his acts of kindness and mercy. And perhaps we can relate to that. Perhaps when suffering comes, when trauma comes, when difficulties come, it can be really hard to see any good purpose in what we are experiencing.

Perhaps we can feel the weight of God's hand being against us. Perhaps we have a sense of God being absent in this situation. But to just stop and reflect on Ruth chapter 1 and on Naomi's journey, we recognize that she has been gifted with a daughter-in-law of a beautiful and a bold faith.

[32 : 05] She has been shown mercy in that she's returning to a place where there is bread and not famine. That she will know grace beyond judgment.

She is being welcomed back to her community and ultimately she's going to see her family become part of that great story of God's redeeming love for the world.

And so even in chapter 1 there are reminders to us. Even in the hardship, even when life seems bitter and against us, we are, as people of faith, keep our eyes open for God's kindness because his mercies are new every morning.

Let's finish with this. Naomi, at this stage, feels that God is against her, that God's hand is against her.

God's God's God's God's question of is God for me or against me? Whatever day, whatever part of our journey of faith.

[33 : 20] Again, we need the gospel and the gospel journey to help us to answer that. To think about the loving commitment of our God towards us, that God sent his son Jesus, and Jesus the son willingly left his home in glory to become one of us and to live here to be God with us.

And we need to see Jesus and not just making that journey to earth, but making that journey to earth so he could make that journey to the cross, taking judgment for sin, for our sin, for the sake of his people, dying so we might live, knowing condemnation so we might be forgiven and reconciled.

Jesus is the one who came as our Emmanuel, came as God with us, totally committed to us in covenant love, in undying love.

And it's as we understand the gospel and as our faith is in Jesus that we can say with confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It's as we come to know the God of redeeming love that we are able to trust that all things will in God's hands and in God's time work together for his glory and for our good.

Let's pray to our God together. Father God, we thank you for the book of Ruth and we thank you for what it can teach us of your sovereign grace and mercy, that you are able to work beyond sin and beyond bad decisions.

[35 : 11] You are able to work in a way that highlights your grace and gains you the glory that you deserve. We thank you that your desire is to redeem a people for yourself, that Jesus came to carry out that great work of redemption.

And Lord, we thank you for where the story of Ruth fits into that storyline, that through this family would come King David and all those promises of an eternal king who would rule and reign in righteousness forever, would find their fulfillment in King Jesus.

Please help us to be those who would walk by faith and not by sight. Please help us to be those who would count our blessings, that even in the hardships that we face, that we would be able to see glimpses of your mercy and your sustaining grace.

Lord, we pray to have that strong sacrificial faith that Ruth had, determining at all costs that you would be our God and that your people would be our people.

So please help us, please answer our prayers, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.