

Running on Empty, God of Grace - Ruth Ch 1:1-6

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[0 : 00] To be here, I'm looking forward to it. I feel a little bit under pressure that it's some people's first time, you know, and I feel under pressure that, you know, that after today you want to come back to church and hear the sermon and you're not longing to get back to Sunday school.

I was down in Middleton Baptist on the 11th of August and my two children were invited to come with us and they opted to stay with Granny. They said, I'm not going to travel all of the way just to listen to you speak.

We can hear you speak, you know, every day, you know, preaching at us over the dinner table. So they declined. So hopefully I don't disappoint those who are joining us for the first time from Sunday school.

But if you'd like to turn in your Bible to the book of Ruth, So that will go Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, and then you should find Judges, then Ruth.

And so hopefully on the other page or just before in my Bible, you should see Judges chapter 21 and verse 25. And that's where we're going to begin our reading.

[1 : 23] In those days Israel had no king and everyone did as they saw fit.

And in those days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And so a man from Bethlehem and Judea, 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. And they were Ephraimites from Bethlehem, Judah.

And they went to Moab and they lived there. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died. And she was left with her two sons. And they married Moabite women, one named Orpha and the other Ruth. And after they had lived there about ten years, both Malon and Kilion also died. And Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. But 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.

[2 : 37] Amen. So Ruth is a strange little book. It's a story of romance. It's a story of loss.

It's a story of redemption. And it's also the story of the birth of a king or eventually. It's a book that sort of ties together the book of Judges and the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

Well, the kids in Sunday school, they were learning about the succession of kings. But how did we get to kings? Well, Ruth helps sort of fill in the narrative. It also provides us a little bit of a window of what it was like to live during the time, during the period of the judges.

When you read the judges, you're reading about, I suppose, the judges themselves, the conquests, the sins of Israel. But here is a little, you could say, period drama, right in the middle of all of that.

And we even have our own Mr. Darcy. We have a character called Boaz, who we'll read about later in the coming weeks. He's not here yet, but he's coming.

[3 : 46] But here we have the title this morning of Running on Empty. We need to know about a God of grace. But first of all, we need to think about the background to the book of Judges.

So we're going to do a little bit of thinking about that. I don't know, you don't need to put up your hand, but I'm sure there are some country and western musical fans about here, I'm sure.

Well, a modern sort of, I don't know if people like Katie Musgraves or not, but she is quite popular, I think. But she had this hit song, and it goes like this.

If you save yourself for marriage, you're a bore. And if you don't save yourself for marriage, you're a horrible person. If you won't have a drink, then you're a prude. But they'll call you drunk as soon as you down the first one.

And if you can't lose weight, then you're just fat. But if you lose too much, you're on crack. You're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't. So you might as well just do whatever it is you want.

[4 : 47] So make lots of noise and kiss lots of boys or kiss lots of girls, if that's something you're into. When the straight and narrow gets a little too straight, roll up the joint or don't.

And here's the kicker. Just follow your arrow wherever it points. Yes, follow your arrow wherever it points. And that's basically today's culture, the overriding arch of what our young people or what our middle-aged people or what our old people should do with their lives.

They should just follow their own arrow. Just do as they see fit. And so we are no different than the people in the book of Ruth. We are no different from the people in the book of Judges.

We are following our own arrow. And so we're the same.

We do as we please. We live like there is no God. You know, when we sin, we almost become, you know, for that moment, a momentary atheist.

[6 : 02] We think that we're, you know, God can't see us. If you're not a Christian here this morning, I'm quite sure that you live and you do as you see fit.

I thought I was going to lose my sermon, you know, as we began to share in the worship. It's true. Ireland has no king. That's not a political statement.

It's a fact. Great Britain has no king. The USA has no king. And by that I mean that no one who can stand up and say, I am the authority.

I am the person that you must obey, that you must listen to. With our idea of democracy and politics and our ideas of freedom of speech, which are all great.

But they also have bred in a sense of rebellion and a sense of we can do what we want to do just because we can. A society of rights.

[7 : 04] I get to choose. I get to choose who I am. I get to choose what I do. I get to choose how I do it. And there's nothing that you can do that can dissuade me from that.

And so that's the world we live in and that is the world, really, that we look into in the book of Ruth. What we really need is a psalm too.

We need the Lord's anointed. We actually need a true king. Someone who is the king of kings and the Lord of lords. We need to bow to the lordship of Christ. That's the only solution to our situation. So the drive to change laws and promote lifestyles is basically a world ignoring God in large or small ways and people doing what is right in their own eyes.

And in the book of Ruth, there's nothing different here. Elimelech was not different. He was the head of the family and he takes his family from the land that God had promised and he takes them to Moab.

[8 : 02] And he left Bethlehem. We all know that story from Bethlehem from the narrative of the birth of Christ. It's where Christ was born.

It's the city of David. It's where King David was born. And so it means house of bread. So they literally left the house of food and they went in search of greener grass.

And you might say, well, what's wrong with that? Why is that significant? What's wrong with them leaving one place and going to another? People do it all the time.

But what's interesting about the place that they went to, first of all, it's a place that God said, these are your enemies. These are the enemies of Israel. Have nothing to do with them. They had a history with Israel which meant that God wasn't pleased with the Moabites.

And so going to Moab was a bad idea. Not only was that, they were also told to not intermarry with Moabites. So it wasn't like just going off and moving house.

[9 : 07] It was like going off and moving house and going to, I suppose, live in Syria. Going to somewhere where you're not really liked, you shouldn't really like them, and living there.

And everybody else going, what are you doing that for? So they went and they were living in a place that wasn't good for them, biblically speaking.

Elimelech's name, ironically, means that God is king. Yet, he doesn't acknowledge God as his king and he decides that he's going to up sticks and go to Moab.

And the other context we need to think about as we look through the book of Judges is how the book of Judges, how women are characterized during this period of the Judges according to the book of Judges.

And then we have Ruth, which is very, very different. I don't know what it's like to be a woman and I never will know what it's like to be a woman.

[10:17] But I certainly don't know what it was like to be a woman living in the period of the Judges. I don't know what it's like to be a woman today, but let's have a look at a few things of how women were portrayed during the Judges.

They were people of violence. They were both victims and perpetrators. We have Jael, who takes a tent peg and she sort of, quite graphically, puts it through King Scissor's head.

And Deborah, she's delighted in this killing of this evil king. And Abimelech, who is the would-be king, he gets crushed by a woman using a millstone.

It's quite a graphic idea how women are being portrayed. We have the story of Samson and Delilah, the seductress, who takes Samson and breaks him until they get the secret from him so that Samson can be captured by the Philistines.

And then we have this horrible story of a concubine who has been brutalized by the people of Israel. And so the priest then takes her and cuts her up and takes her about and scatters her body parts to express the horror of what was being done in the land of Israel.

[11:43] And then we have the forced marriages from the young virgins. It paints a picture of brutality, of horror, and also of the lack of, you could say, protection that women had during that period.

And we see that marked in the Book of Ruth. And so that's the context that we have. We have no king. Everybody's doing as they see fit.

And we have this very unstable, unsafe place for women. But we start off in the Book of Ruth with, if you like, our first point.

We start off with a family that's full. It's a happy home. It says, in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So we know that times are tough.

There was an economic crisis. There weren't the jobs for everybody to avail of. Things were tough. And so a man from Bethlehem, the house of bread in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, they went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

[12:53] And so there's a few things we can have here. We have Emelech. He's the man. He's not named yet. But he takes his wife and his two sons. He's a nuclear family.

He has his, all of his ducks in a row. We're not really quite sure why he left. The early rabbinic sources say that Emelech left basically because he was selfish.

They said that he didn't want to share with people during the famine, so he took everything that he had and he legged it to Moab, selfishly, because he could. The text is silent on why he left, but we know that he did leave.

And in leaving, there is a sense of disobedience. He's going to the enemies of God, leaving the people of God, and he's going. It's not clear if Naomi was on board with the plan, whether she wanted to stay or not, but she doesn't get a say in the matter.

Emelech leaves and he takes Naomi with her and the two sons and they have a full family and they go and they spend a period of time there. And we're not sure when it happens, but it does happen that Emelech dies.

[14:08] But if we just want to back up and we have a look, they went to live for a while. Now the commentators and everybody want to sort of highlight this, is that it wasn't a permanent thought.

They weren't going to live there forever. They were only going to go and stay for a wee while. They were only going to go and stay a short time. Maybe they wanted to see out the famine. But that's not what happens.

We think, look in verse 2 and it says, and they went to Moab and they lived there. It became more of a permanent fixture than maybe they had once thought. So we have a full family.

We're not sure why there was a famine, but we read in Deuteronomy 28, 3, verse 24, that if the people of Israel didn't follow after God, that God would send judgments on the land and one of those was a famine.

So the text doesn't say this is a famine that's been sent as judgment, but we can safely assume that it has that potential behind it. He gathers up his family and he goes to the descendants of Moab who are Lot's descendants.

[15:17] So if you remember in Genesis, you had Abraham and Lot. Lot was Abraham's nephew and his daughters had children and they became the Moabites.

And so we have the two sons. So in verse 2, it says the man's name is Elimelech, meaning that God is king and his wife's name was Naomi, which meant was sweet.

So there we have Elimelech and his sweet Naomi. And then we have Malon and Kilion. And these two names are sort of in the text, they kind of mean weakling or sickly.

So Malon has the idea of being weak and Kilion sickly. So maybe he wasn't being selfish at all. Maybe Elimelech was really thinking, you know, mighty sons, they're not going to survive the famine. So maybe it was just a, you know, let's do the logic. Let's go somewhere where there's food. Let's go and help our children. Maybe it was motivated by his own care and his love to see his two boys grow up and have lives.

[16:27] We're not sure, but true to their names, we find out that the family has a setback. And we have the setback one in verse three.

Now, Elimelech, Naomi's husband, well, he died and she was left with her two sons, so all is not lost. Like every good drama, we start off with tragedy.

And then this one is no different. We have tragedy. They go to Moab and then the husbands died. Now, that may not necessarily be that significant to us.

It's also, you know, someone's husband's died, it's terrible and now you grieve the loss of someone. But in the ancient world, when you lost your husband, you lost your livelihood, you lost your income, you lost your means of protection, you lost your support.

And so the family has a setback. You see, they had planned to escape the famine by going to Moab.

[17:41] But actually, by going to Moab, you can't really escape life and circumstance. There's a lesson there. Running to Moab is never a good idea.

Doing things in our own way is never a good idea. They should have stayed in the promised land. It's the land that God had said that he would bless his people.

And if God was judging them for the famine, well, surely the right thing would have been to be there to promote godliness and for them to repent. But no, they decided not.

But in verse 4, we find out that it's not complete disaster. So the children, by this time, we assume that they have grown up to be of age so that they can marry and work. So they're not children anymore.

And it says in verse 4 that they married Moabite women, which they were forbidden under the law not to do. One named Orpha and the other was named Ruth.

[18:46] So they had lots of things going on here. After they had lived there about 10 years, disaster strikes again.

So they go from the general scheme of things in all families. they went from crisis to some restoration to crisis. Isn't that how we all live sometimes?

We're just waiting for the next wrong thing to happen. And then there's good things. Life is full of struggles. And so Elimelech's family is no different.

The sons have married but there's no children. It's interesting.

The names in the book of Ruth are I think quite significant. And Ruth, this lady Ruth who we're going to learn an awful lot about, her name means friend, companion.

[19:52] And we're going to learn throughout the coming weeks how true that she lived up to her name, how much of a friend and a companion that she becomes to Naomi.

And so she's gone in the space of four verses from a full life to one that is completely empty. That's harsh.

And what's really good is that we don't really come out of that this morning. That's where we leave Ruth this morning and Naomi and Orpha. We leave them in their emptiness.

happiness. It's a total loss. It's disaster. It is not a good picture. The three ladies have been left.

They went from a family that was full and where they had, you know, it was a, if you like, a male-led family and now they're destitute.

so in the space of ten years, because we're not quite sure in the text, it doesn't say that Elimelech died and they got married.

[21:01] We're not sure if that all happened around the same time or whether there was a space between it and it's ten years later that the sons die. But there's no heirs, there's no children, there's no sons, there's no daughters.

The men have gone. And so the significance of this is that food is now their secondary concern. They are, if you like, all lost at sea with no direction, no seal, no rudder, because now they have no providers for food.

And on top of that, poor Naomi is in a foreign country. And if you're feeling sorry for Naomi, I hope that you are. That's the kind of picture that the Bible is painting.

This is devastation. I know you were wanting to come and hear a nice encouragement sermon this morning, and not a story about how bad life was in the period of the judges, but for Naomi and her family, that is the reality of the book of Ruth.

She is destitute. But isn't that like all of us? Without Christ, without God, no matter how much we have or how little we have or where we live, really what we have isn't really worth very much.

[22 : 21] Nine Inch Nails, I'm sure you're all quite familiar with that band. You might be more familiar with Johnny Cash. He took one of their songs and sort of made it more popular to people that didn't like Nine Inch Nails.

And this is how it goes. It says, I hurt myself today to see if I still feel. I focus on the pain, the only thing that's real. The needle tears a hole, the old familiar sting.

Try to kill it all away, but I remember everything. What have I become? My sweetest friend, everyone I know, goes away in the end.

And you can have it all, my empire of dirt. I will let you down, because I will make you hurt. I wear this crown of thorns upon my liar's chair, full of broken thoughts that I cannot repair.

Beneath the stains of time, the feelings of despair, you are someone else. I am still right there.

What have I become, my sweetest friend?

[23 : 25] Everyone I know, goes away in the end. And you can have it all, my empire of dirt. I will let you down. I will make you hurt. If I could start again a million miles away, I will keep myself, I would find, away.

I think that Naomi might be feeling just a little like that. She might be feeling that, what have I become? What about my hopes?

What about my dreams? What about the expectations? I'm here, I'm alone. Even the people that I'm with don't need to be with me. I'm left with my daughters-in-law.

And so where do we go? And we look at verse six.

When Naomi heard in Moab, good news travels all the way to Moab, that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them.

[24 : 38] So she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. Good news reached Naomi. It wasn't completely good news.

Nobody likes to go back to where they left in failure. And so that's where we're going to leave Naomi. She's going to go on that journey. We're going to go on that journey with her.

But we're going to stop and we're going to think about that the Lord had come. When I was a young boy of, I think I was about 12 years old, and I went to a camp and someone actually told me the word of the Lord.

I was a rascal. I, yeah, I was that kid, you know, the one that, yes, their parents pulled their hair out over, you know.

But I went away to a camp and someone told me about Christ. Someone said that you can live a different life. Someone said to me that you can change, and the way to change is that you believe the gospel, and that you repent of your sin, and that you follow after Christ all of your days.

[25 : 53] And the reason that you can do this is because Christ died for your sins, and he died to make you a different person. He died to make you from a rascal into a child of God.

And I thought, that's awesome. And so I believed in Christ, and I followed him ever since, and it's been an interesting journey as I have walked with God, but I've never once thought that was a bad idea.

I heard the word of the Lord, and I heard that there was food, and I came, and I found bread. And so I would encourage you this morning that if you don't know Christ, and this is the first time that you've been in church, Christ is there for you, just like God was there for Naomi.

You see, we leave this morning with a word of grace. Yahweh had provided food. The news prompts Naomi to say, I know what rascals they were back home.

Maybe, maybe if I go home, at least I can find bread. And then, whose idea was it anyway to come here? My husband, Emilech, he brought me here.

[27 : 16] I didn't really want to come. My husband's dead. My children are dead. I have some friends back in Israel. I have some friends in Bethlehem.

I have some family there. Maybe they'll take me back. Maybe they'll accept me back into their community. Maybe. But as Naomi would discover God has better plans than just maybe. God has better plans for you. God has better plans for me than just maybe. See, it reminds me a little of the story Jesus told about the prodigal son.

It's in Luke chapter 15, verses 11 to 32. We won't go there, but we have a story of a son who says, do you know what, Father, I wish you were dead. I want to go and live life on my terms, and I want to go and live life my way.

In fact, I wish you were dead, so let's imagine that you are dead and give me all of the money that you would have given to me if you had died. I want my inheritance now. And he goes to the far off land, he goes to Moab, you could say, and he squanders his life.

[28 : 30] And he loses all of his money, he loses all of his family's inheritance, and he ends up feeding pigs, and having nothing. He is gone as low as he can go.

But in the midst of that, he remembers. He remembers that in his father's house, even the servants have enough to eat. And he says to himself, what am I doing here?

My father loves me. Maybe he'll accept me back, even just as a servant. And at least I'll have food, because here I have nothing and I'm starving. And he returns to his father.

But when he returns to his father, he finds out that his father has better plans than just food and service. He finds that his father embraces him back into his own heart.

And like the prodigal, and like Naomi, we need to hear the word of the Lord. We need to know that Father God is waiting for us. He's there. He's wanting to welcome us back, just like the prodigal.

[29 : 43] And he proved it, in that he sent his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die for us. God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son. And that's the good news. That's why we're all here this morning.

If you know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, we're going to celebrate his sacrifice through the breaking of bread. We heard the good report, the good news, and we returned home.

And so I would encourage you to return home this morning. Sometimes it takes extreme circumstances. Sometimes it's at our point of need.

It's like the prodigal son. It's when we're at our lowest. It's when we're feeding pigs and the pigs die. Maybe it's like Naomi. It's loss. It's famine. It's bereavement.

And it brings us to the point that we realize, you know what? Life's not too good living it my way. Doing what's right in our own eyes is not really where it's at. I need something else.

[30 : 45] Let us pray. O Lord, whose power is infinite and wisdom infallible, order things that they may neither hinder nor discourage me, nor prove obstacles to the progress of thy cause.

Stand between me and all strife, that no evil befall and no sin corrupts my gifts, zeal, or attainments. May I follow duty and not any foolish device of my own.

Permit me not to labor at work, which thou wilt not bless, that I may serve thee without disgrace or debt. Father God, would you help us realize that you being king is the most important thing that we can ever know.

Lord, that we would not want to live lives as we see fit. Lord, that we would seek to desire to know you, to know your will, to know your ways. And Lord, to follow you in love and to share that love and that knowledge of you with everyone.

Because knowing that there is bread in the house of bread, knowing that you are the bread of life. Knowing that is the greatest treasure for anyone.

[32 : 19] And Lord, would you impact us again just with the glory of Christ and what you have provided for us in your sacrifice. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Anne. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Maim. Amen. Amen.