

Ruth 1

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 October 2022

Preacher: Bing Nieh

[0 : 00] You'll find the book of Ruth will be in chapter 1. This is what it says. 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 Ahimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahalan and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah.

They went into the country of Moab and remained there, but Emelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives.

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

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.

[1 : 11] 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 your 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 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 they 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 bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown?

Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters. For it is 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 Orpha kissed her mother-in-law.

[2 : 20] 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.

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. 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, Do not 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?

[3 : 23] So Naomi returned, Ruth and the Moabite, her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Father, now we come to your word.

And as we have sung, may redeeming love be our theme. And may it be our theme, not only until the day we die, but long after we die, that we will find that it is your love that has preserved, sustained, and will uphold and preserve us.

And so go with us in these next minutes, we pray. We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Insignificant and obscure.

It's probably one of the most unsettling feelings you and I can have or experience. The feeling of being ignored. You may experience it as a citizen of a large city whose policies and programs ignore you.

[4 : 38] You may feel it in the workplace where profits are being made, though its people are being ignored. Even at a world-class university with countless resources, the student may fall by the wayside and little concern shown.

Insignificant and obscure. Perhaps this feeling is most troubling and unsettling, though, when we feel it with God.

It's easy to readily admit that God is lofty and grand, concerned with the suspension of the stars, orbit of the planets, the preservation of Earth.

But when we consider possible attention on my single, solitary life, it's much harder to believe. When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, said the psalmist. What is man that you're mindful of him? The son of man that you care for him. Doesn't he have bigger and better things to focus on? He is so lofty, one theologian noted.

[5 : 51] We have lofted him right out of our lives. He doesn't have concern for these tiny pieces, does he? Well, we emerge from the book of Joshua.

And we begin a four-week series in the book of Ruth. And in Joshua, we're given this macroscopic look on the nation. It's a focus on, it was a focus on large swaths of land given to God's people, as he had promised.

It's about the security of the nation. We were invited into the Oval Office, so to say. The Command Center. The halls of power where we saw generals at work for much of the book.

We became aware of the progress of the nation. And when we arrive at the book of Ruth, we actually take a different vantage point. We are no longer in the halls of power, but now we are at the margins.

Where things are seemingly insignificant, forgettable, overlooked, and obscure. But you see, our Bibles will not let us live with such a view of God that only operates in what appears to be significant places or ivory towers.

[7 : 09] God's story would be written in the command center of Israel's general. And it would be written in the barley fields of a peasant immigrant.

The book of Ruth is embedded in our Bibles here to remind us that God is certainly operative up there. But he was also operative down here.

As men tend to make the headlines of Hebrew narrative for both good and bad, God gives us a story featuring a woman, arguably two women, who would occupy center stage.

In a day where women were victims, objects, casualties of wickedness, God would remind us that he by no means will overlook a woman, a widow, in her distress.

He is certainly God who is mighty in battle. And he will be God who is merciful when we are bitter. He is glorious in victory and gracious in anguish.

[8 : 15] This is the great news of the God of the Bible. He will tether himself to the insignificant, the forgotten, the neglected, the hurting, the broken. The story of Ruth is 85 short verses.

But it embodies this reality that God will come alongside the most desperate people, the most dire circumstances, and show up.

There are no circumstances that are unredeemable. This is a story of reversal. Hence, we've titled the series, Ruth, a Redemption Story.

It's one where the conclusion truly is, and they live happily ever after. This is how we all want our lives to end, is it not?

Whatever life holds, we desire to live happily ever after. And the Bible asserts that regardless of how life begins, how it may continue and carry forth, the conclusion in Christ will be happily ever after.

[9 : 16] For those who tether themselves to the Lord Jesus. Every story is a redemption story. Your story, when it is all written, will bear testimony to God's ability to redeem.

Now that I've introduced this series, I want to introduce this chapter. I'm just going to give you the title. I've tagged it with this title, When God Gives You Lemons.

When God Gives You Lemons. I know there are some people who did not grow up in the United States, and it's a nod to an American proverbial statement. When someone gives you lemons, it's referring to you receiving something bad, terrible, broken, and faulty.

What happens when God seems to give you the life you didn't want? Well, we'll trace it in this chapter. The flow is pretty simple.

We will see a forced departure in verses 1 to 5, and it's followed by a sad departure, I just say, in verses 1 to 5, followed by an embittered return.

[10:28] Verses 6 to the end. A sad departure followed by an embittered return. The book of Ruth opens up and establishes a setting. You see it.

We're given the who, what, when, where, why in the first five verses. It's set in the days of the judges. We only need to flip back in our Bibles. This is where it's advantageous to have the whole Bible, not just Ruth.

But if you have the whole Bible, you flip back one page, and in the final verse, in the book of Judges, you read it there. In those days, the days of the judges, there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. What you are to envision is anarchy, because that's what the book of Judges gives you the feel for.

It was chaos. And here we're given a hint at the purpose of the book of Ruth in its opening verse. There is the backdrop of an empty throne, but the camera quickly zooms in and focuses in on a single, obscure family.

[11:33] There is no mention of this family up to this point in the Bible. A famine has struck Bethlehem. Food had become scarce. We find a father leaving the land of Judah and becoming a sojourner or an immigrant, relinquishing his rights, his native rights, as an Israelite, as a member of the household of God.

And he leaves with his family to the country of Moab. Verse 1 is laden with meaning, and I'm going to spend a few minutes here. We need to know these significant geographical places.

Bethlehem will be repeated almost excessively in chapter 1. Same with Moab. There are certainly geographical places, but the author will go to unusual lengths to emphasize these places.

Bethlehem and Moab held in verse 1 are actually, it ends, the first chapter also ends with Bethlehem and Moab. The irony is that Bethlehem literally translated in the original language is house of bread.

House of bread. Bethlehem, however, at this time was no longer house bread. It could not sustain its residence any longer. The land, Bethlehem, resided in Judah.

[12:52] The land that was supposed to flow with milk and honey, and instead of being filled with plenty, was now in want. Certainly the famine could have been explained by drought or pestilence.

But students of the Bible may know that Israel, the nation, had signed a renter's agreement with God. Now, I don't know if you rent your place, but in the same way you and I would sign a lease agreement that was contingent on particular terms when entering a rental property, Israel had signed one with God.

It wasn't so much dependent on could you pay the rents or the finances. It was far less dependent on the finances. It was far more dependent on Israel's faithfulness.

If Israel failed to devote themselves to God and gave themselves up to idolatry and the heinous practices of surrounding nations, God would serve them in eviction notice.

And the land, according to Leviticus 18 and 20, would spit them out, or more literally, vomit them out, or, as my son did last night, puke them out.

[14:10] And it was certainly accelerated in the days of the exile when the Assyrians, the Babylonians, would come and take them out of the land. But here in the meantime, the land begins to express God's displeasure.

By withholding its fruitfulness. So Elimelech and Naomi are certainly faced with a difficult decision, and they make their decision.

They leave Bethlehem and settle in Moab. Now, of all the places one should immigrate, Moab was not a good choice. It didn't appear to be a clear choice.

Its origin stemmed from an incestuous relationship. The Moabites were actually forbidden to enter into the assembly of Israel up to the 10th generation because they were terribly inclined to Israel. Moreover, Numbers 25 records for us one of the most tragic scenes. As Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore themselves with the daughters of Moab.

[15:16] These daughters invited the people to sacrifice to their gods. And Israel ate and bowed down to their gods. So it was, according to Numbers 25, Israel yoked themselves to idols because of the Moabites.

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against God. The history with Moab went deep and it was dark. To go to Moab is more terrible than a Sox fan becoming a Cubs fan or a Bears fan donning the forbidden cheese head.

However, the narrator is surprisingly silent and doesn't pronounce a judgment on Elimelech and Naomi. The text does not give us enough to interpret whether the move was favorable or not. Perhaps the narrator knows too well that famine in the Bible is often an impetus for God to show up. A la Joseph. Even the story of the prodigal son. Here we have an immigrant family leaving the familiar for the unfamiliar, the known for the unknown.

[16:25] They would be strangers, social outcasts, subject to the fate of migrants. The very act of migration is enough to devastate the family. But we know it's far more than that.

The act of departure was difficult. And what would unfold in Moab would actually present to us the conflict in the plot of the book of Ruth.

Though Moab would feed the family, it would cost three lives. First, it was Elimelech, the husband that was buried in verse 3.

In verse 4, there's some hope. Oh, they took wives. But soon after, we find now in verse 5, there's two additional burials.

Naomi, unnamed in verse 5, the woman was now left without her two sons, without her husband.

[17:32] Three burials. She had set out in search of bread. And by the end of verse 5, she has buried three of her loved ones.

If you ask any immigrant, the arduous journey is taken with the hopes of securing a better life, a more promising future, longing for something better. Naomi only found bereavement.

It was a sad departure. And now having spent 10 years, at least 10 years in Moab, verse 6 introduces us to the return.

It's not a joyful return. Far from it. It's actually an embittered return. Naomi has caught wind that there is now food in Bethlehem. Food was being restored to the promised land, and so she commits to returning.

While they're on the way, she pauses, stops somewhere, and implores three times for her daughters-in-law to go back to Moab.

[18:32] You see, they are from Moab, native to Moab. And Naomi perceives that they would fare much better under the care of their own homes or their own mothers than in Bethlehem.

As previously mentioned, Moabites were frowned upon in Israel. Naomi's heart for her daughters-in-law are revealed in some of the statements that she makes.

Her prayer, according to verse 8, revealed the request for God to show them kindness. As they return home, may God show them kindness.

She desired for them to start new lives of permanence, security, and rest in the homes, according to verse 9, of new husbands. Here she expresses her desire that they should be remarried.

Naomi's prayer, we find, is met by protest. But her insistence continues in verse 11, a sequence of rhetorical questions. Turn, have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?

[19:42] Would you therefore wait till they are grown? Verse 13. And this sequence of questions is really to deter the two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpha, to go travel with Naomi.

Why prohibit yourselves? That's what she's saying. Why prohibit yourselves from getting married? In Naomi's mind, remarriage in Israel would be impossible. The chances of living happily ever after were better in Moab.

They weren't to be found in Bethlehem. The plea resulted in Orpha turning back. The scene is incredibly emotional. The narrator wants us to know the affection between mother and daughter-in-law.

They are her daughters, mentioned three times. The scene is Kleenex-laden. You see the tears. The cries are intense, audible and aloud. The mutual affection is heightened by kisses.

It's a heart-wrenching scene. Gutting. And for Naomi, embittering. The goodbye reveals Naomi's understanding of the circumstances.

[20:51] This was your fault, God. This is your doing. Widowed, childless, hopeless, life was now an orchard full of lemons.

And as she enters Bethlehem, shamefully, the town was astir. She requests a name change from Naomi to Mara, literally meaning from pleasant or sweet to bitter. For God had emptied her life. It was now devoid of purpose and meaning. God had dealt bitterly. God had brought calamity. God was to blame and the narrator is sure to let us know this is how she felt.

Her circumstances have now determined the type of God Naomi knew. Naomi tells us about the God of Israel. Seemingly merciless, malicious, mean.

He's taken it all from me. It was an embittered return. I have yet to mention, though, the character for whom this book is named.

[22 : 01] As Orpha submitted to Naomi's plea to return, Ruth, in verse 14, defies Naomi's counsel.

We're given little to judge whether Orpha's action is legit. It's understandable. Her departure may simply be viewed as an act of obedience and submission to her mother-in-law.

But it's Ruth's action that actually leaves us a bit puzzled and bewildered. Because here, in chapter 1, Ruth conjoins herself to Naomi, the hopeless, helpless, embittered widow.

As Orpha departed, Ruth clung, matching the word that we get for marriage in Genesis. And Naomi wouldn't have it.

She would actually use peer pressure to try to get Ruth to turn around. Look, Ruth, your sister has gone back. Why don't you go back?

[23 : 06] But Ruth doubles down in what appears to be a stubborn loyalty. Don't urge me to leave you or return from following you. For where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people and your God, my God. And where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord do to me more also if anything but death parts me from you.

The fate of Naomi or the fate of Ruth does not appear promising as she tethers her fate to Naomi. From a worldly vantage point, this is apparent foolishness. From all conceivable angles, financially, relationally, socially, this is a bad choice.

Ruth. She's renouncing her ethnic and religious roots and all of a sudden adopting a new nationality and religion associated with Naomi.

Now, we're not exactly, we're uncertain how much Ruth actually knew about the God of Israel. It's not far-fetched to think that in over a decade together that Naomi did share stories of life in Bethlehem.

[24 : 17] Is this a profession of faith? Is this conversion? It certainly resembles a change, a switch from a little G God to the capital G God of Israel.

She may be professing more than she's aware at the moment. It's difficult to analyze the content of the profession, but the narrator doesn't expand more, and I think for good reason.

Because what the narrator wants to demonstrate is Ruth's loyalty to Naomi. Naomi. We are to see Ruth's conduct and choice as exceptional, as extraordinary, as unexpected.

Taking the language of verse 14, she is now clinging to her mother-in-law. It's as if Ruth would wed her well-being to Naomi. Ruth now commences the journey of leaving her homeland.

Her family ties her culture and her gods and begins a journey to a new place. As Orpha returned to Moab, as Naomi returned to Bethlehem, the odd one out is Ruth.

[25 : 23] She's not returning home to Bethlehem. Ruth is going to a new place with a new people and no home. And perhaps the reader, you and I are inclined to ask this.

If Orpha goes home, if Naomi goes home, where is Ruth going? Could she find a home in Israel? No husband, no children, no income, no security, foreigner, stranger, no rights, helpless, hopeless. And this is what is so stunning. that Ruth possesses every worldly disqualification and yet she pledges herself to the God of Israel.

Now catch this, okay? The question that emerges is if Ruth can pledge herself to Naomi and the God of Israel, can anyone?

[26 : 33] no, no, I don't, there's stipulations, right? She's a Moabite. She's a Moabite.

She's, doesn't receive any of the promises of God. She's a widow. She's barren, well not barren, I mean childless at this point.

What resources does she have? What does she add to this? What can she bring? Could it be possible? You and I the reader must ask that one who is separated, one who is alienated, one who is a stranger to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and no God in the world, can actually adhere themselves to the God of Israel.

That is what is baffling about chapter one. And as the chapter closes, in keeping with the suspense of the chapter, I don't want to disclose how the story continues.

You have it before you. You can read on, but I will refrain from preaching on. It just so happens that as the widow and her foreign daughter-in-law walk into Bethlehem, the barley harvest is beginning.

[28 : 00] It would seem that the Lord was up to something, certainly with barley and likely with lemons as well. And as we close, I want to close in an unusual way.

It's a children's book, and it rhymes. And I think it will help us digest what was just shared.

The story of Ruth, I'll only read up to the first chapter. It can't be true. I can't go on. Oh, everything we had is gone. Naomi wept. Poor Ruthie cried.

Naomi's precious sons had died. And oh, one precious priceless son, Naomi's son, that very one was Ruthie's husband. Lord above, her one and only, her one true love.

Now sometimes when it rains, it pours, and this time it would pour for sure. For evil people rule the land as evil people sometimes can and sometimes will and sometimes do.

[29 : 08] When you and I allow them to. From here to there, from there to here, the food began to disappear. It filled the people full of fear, yes, full of fear, from year to year. Or, but Ruth, Naomi cried, the time has come, we must decide, we have to leave, we cannot stay, we cannot stay, not now, no way.

From north to south, from west to east, the men are gone, extinct, deceased. Without a man, Naomi said, we're all about as good as dead. Now, ladies, things were different then, so please don't get too upset, amen?

Just look at me, I'm old and wrinkled, sagged and bagged and crooked and crinkled, crumpled, puckered, nooked and crannied, ripped and winkled, grayed and grannied. Oh, there's just no hope in sight to find another Mr.

Right, or even just a daffy duck, an Elmer Fudd, or Mr. Yuck. The time has come, the time is now, the time has come right now and how.

You must return, you must, I say, return back home right now today. Naomi prayed that they would see the light and Orba knew that she was right. She packed her bags without a fight and left for home that very night.

[30 : 23] But oh, not Ruth, not her, no way, she had a thing or two to say. I can't return, I want to stay. I will not go right now today.

For where you are is where I'll be. And where you stay, you'll stay with me. And when you die, I'll die with you, and that is what I'm going to do. Your God will be my God, and he will surely care for you and me.

Oh, what a thing for Ruth to say. That kind of thing can make your day and make you shout hip, hip, hooray. Naomi, is it really true?

What happened, girl? Look at you. Your hair, your clothes, your shoes, your toes, your eyes, your ears, your mouth, your nose. You're looking pale, you're looking thin.

In fact, if we may say again, you're really looking more akin to something that the cat dragged in. well, things look bad the way things can.

[31 : 30] But listen, but listen now. God had a plan. Father, we are captivated by the stories of insignificant people.

Somehow, receiving, redeeming love. And we identify with them. We want it to be true of us.

And so, Father, as we pause in these next moments to consider what redeeming love has accomplished in our lives, I pray that we would be reminded that we were all strangers and aliens, foreigners, outcasts, widows, lost, depraved.

And if it were not for the universal invitation of the Lord Jesus, we would have perished in our sins.

And so now, as we come to commemorate all that you've accomplished on our behalf, we pray that we would worship and respond well.

We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Thank you.