

Ruth

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] There's an old story about a man who was doing his first parachute jump. He was understandably very nervous and he memorised very carefully the instructions that he had been given.

Number one, when told to jump, jump. Don't hang around because otherwise you get cold feet and you'll never do it. Number two, count to ten and then pull your ripcord.

Number three, in the unlikely event of the parachute not opening, then pull your emergency ripcord. And lastly, number four, when you eventually reach the ground, just stay where you are.

Don't try and make your way back to base. We will know where you are. A truck will come and collect you. Well, he memorised the instructions and sure enough, when told to jump, he jumped.

Number two, he counted to ten and pulled his ripcord. No parachute. Number three, the unlikely event had happened, so he pulled his backup ripcord.

[1 : 15] Again, no parachute. He thought to himself for a few moments and then said out loud, great, and I suppose the truck won't be there at the bottom when I reach the ground either.

Do you ever have that experience where life is one crisis after another, after another, after another? Just when you think life can't get any worse, it gets worse. If that's ever been your experience, this story of Naomi and Ruth and the others involved in that story, this story is for you.

One crisis after another, after another, after another. To kind of really kind of get our heads around that, we need to think of what that book as a whole is like.

It's not a long book, but one of the striking literary features of the whole of Ruth is its brevity.

[2 : 27] There's hardly any reflective discourse. There are 85 verses in total. 55 of those 85 verses are dialogue between characters, such that when you read the whole of the book of Ruth through from start to finish, at times it almost feels like reading the script of a play.

But here in chapter 1, we have that very brief, blunt introduction which sets the scene before we get to the dialogue.

Let me read to you those first five verses again. Because as we read these first five verses, we see that it plunges straight into the crisis.

The writer wastes no time whatsoever in getting straight to the painful facts. 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.

[4 : 00] 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 two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpha and the other Ruth.

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.

It's so blunt. It's brutal. There's no emotion. Just cold facts laid out right from the get-go. Five verses sum up a ten-year nightmare.

Let's just unpack some of that list of tragedy in a little bit more detail. We're told firstly that it was in the days of the judges.

[5 : 09] We're talking somewhere roughly about 1,100 years or so before the birth of Jesus. That period known as the judges was a time in the life of Israel as a time of chaos.

There was no leadership by way of a monarch. There's a certain irony that the word Elimelech means in Hebrew, my God is king.

So we've got that backdrop that there was chaos going on anyway all over. But we throw into the mix famine. Famine that is so bad that they are driven from their land.

And where do they go? Moab. A land that was known, that was renowned for its immorality. But they're driven there by desperation.

And then we're not given any reason why we're just told that Elimelech died. So Naomi is left stranded in an extremely vulnerable position.

[6 : 22] There's no welfare state there to support her. She's just got her two sons. And they grow up and they marry Moabite women.

Something that would have been looked down upon within their own Jewish culture. But then we're told that both the sons die.

Simple as that. We're not given any reason. We're not told how they die. We're just told that they die. And so little wonder that Naomi says towards the end of the chapter, don't call me Naomi.

Call me Mara. Which means bitterness. But the fascinating thing about this particular journey that she then makes from Moab to Bethlehem, which ends the first chapter of the book of Ruth, is the turning that it takes.

Now we don't have time to unpack the whole story this morning. So let's just stick with chapter one. But I want to suggest that there's something particularly significant about what chapter one does.

[7 : 51] You see, it begins with all of that tragedy and pain and loss. And yet it begins with a sense of hope just around the corner. We don't know yet exactly what that will be.

We don't know how it's going to unfold. We read the whole story and we see it does unfold. But the point is, is in that one chapter, we have a story that begins with a famine and yet finishes with a harvest.

In verse 22, the last verse of chapter one, it says that, The other interesting thing about Bethlehem is in Hebrew, it literally means house of bread.

Every story, every story, every story directly or indirectly in Scripture points to Jesus. And so we have this setting of the scene over a thousand years before his birth, where they're returning to the place of Bethlehem, the house of bread.

Just a sense that there might be this thing called hope just around the corner. Whenever we're immersed with circumstances that are tragic, or full of crisis or pain, the danger can be that our attention focuses in entirety on those circumstances.

[9 : 45] Understandably, Naomi feels full of bitterness plus nothing, as those are the circumstances that surround her.

But God bids us to see beyond the immediacy of those circumstances and to dare to lay hold of a hope, ultimately as in Jesus.

Father Greg Boyle is a Catholic priest in America. He's the founder and director of an organisation called Homeboy Industries, based in LA.

The organisation gives rehab to former gang members. And it's grown and grown and grown over the years, to the extent that now every year, the organisation engages with some 10,000 men and women, getting them off the streets, getting them out of crime, breaking that cycle of violence, crime and prison.

But Greg Boyle, who set this whole thing up, tells a story about how he was at a funeral and the minister leading the funeral shared a really, really helpful and fascinating image of hope.

[11 : 23] Drawing attention to the difference between a full stop and a comma. He says that often in our lives, all we see is a full stop.

Somebody has died, full stop. End of. I'm in terrible pain, full stop. I feel this situation is never going to get any better, full stop.

See, a full stop denotes an end. There's nothing left to be said. It stops there. End of story. And when we look at tragedy and pain and death, that can be the way in which we see it if we look only at the circumstances.

He goes on to say that when we see things through the lens of the risen Jesus, that full stop is changed from being a full stop to being a comma.

You see, a comma doesn't delete everything that's gone before it, but rather than it being an end, it's a pause. Yes, death has occurred, but we draw breath because we know that that's not the end of the story.

[12 : 49] Resurrection is on the horizon. And this was the situation for Naomi. Now, the end of us, we approach the end of chapter one of the book of Ruth.

We're not told the detail, but rather than there being that full stop that just says the death, the grief, the pain, the famine, the hardship, the vulnerability, that that's the end of the story.

Rather, it opens it up. It says, carry on, there's more to say. It reminds us that no matter how we may be tempted to focus in on our circumstances that say there's a full stop, there's nothing more to be said here.

Resurrection hope calls us to swap out that full stop and put a comma in its place. Yeah, I've messed up comma, but things can change and that changes now and I'm going to make a better job things.

I feel absolutely racked with pain. It's never going to get any better physically, emotionally, mentally. Put a comma in there.

[14 : 18] We draw breath. But there is healing and wholeness ahead. we may say to ourselves, I've hit rock bottom, full stop.

But when you put a comma in there, you say, I've hit rock bottom, but I recognise that there is such a thing as a bottom and when you hit it, then you can turn upwards.

See, there's that old saying, never judge a book by its cover. But we can also say the same thing about a chapter.

You see, if we only took the circumstances of Ruth chapter 1 and put a full stop there, we would see a story that ends with pain and bitterness. But that's not what happens.

what we actually have is a comma of hope put there. A drawing of breath, a pause, which says, keep going, there's more to happen here, there's more to come.

[15 : 29] Things actually can and will and do get better. And as that story unfolds, we see reconciliation, hope, redemption and a new beginning.

A story which eventually sees how Ruth becomes the great grandmother of King David and we're pointed towards that ultimate hope of Jesus.

Yeah, there's an old saying, isn't there, that we tend to gaze at our problems and take the odd glimpse or glance at God.

God. What this story reminds us that we need to do is swap those things around. To gaze upon God.

Glimpse at our circumstances, our problems, God, who is the one who replaces the full stop with the comma, who is the one who takes that first chapter, that early chapter, but turns it towards a story of hope.

[16 : 46] Let's pray together. Lord God, we thank you that you transformed Naomi and Ruth's lives, meeting them in their brokenness, emptiness, and bitterness, and leading them to hope and new beginnings.

Lord, forgive us for those times when we allow our gaze to become fixed upon our circumstances. Help us instead to turn our gaze upon you. We take a few moments now as we lay our lives before God.

Thinking of those situations where perhaps we may be tempted to see a full stop. We bring those situations, those circumstances before him.

We ask him to replace that full stop with a comma. Lord, help us to draw breath, to pause, to wait upon you.

[18 : 14] Lord, whatever chapter of our lives we may be in right now, we give you our story and we ask that we may trust you with the rest of that story.

As we live that story out, may we do so with you at the centre of our lives, trusting you, seeking you, searching you, knowing you.

now and in the days to come. We thank you. In Jesus' name. Amen.