

Where you go, I will go: God's Providence

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[0:00] Amen. Let's share in our prayer together.

! Is this coming through all right? Can you hear?

Yeah, okay. Thank you. There's a BBC TV show you may have heard of called Who Do You Think You Are? And the well-known people are assisted to look back in their family history to see if they have any unexpected connections with historical figures.

There have been a couple of notable examples. For example, the actor David Tennant found that his grandfather had played football for Scotland. The roer Matthew Pinson found that he was related to the terrible King Edward I.

And the much better, Bear Grylls found that he has a connection in his past to Robert the Bruce.

Now, who knows what would happen if those two ever met.

[1:21] It's a popular TV show because where we come from is important to us. On my dad's side, as far as I've been able to tell, we are farm labourers in Ayrshire.

But on my mum's side, there's a connection to a famous soldier called Alexander Ramsey of Dalhousie. That's him on the left. He was a strong defender of Robert the Bruce's son, David II, who was crowned while he was still a child.

I think you'll agree he looked very impressive. And you can let me know later if you see any family resemblance. And there I have got two mentions of Robert the Bruce in one sermon, and I've only just started.

But before I get too carried away, we'll remember that we're talking about Ruth. And the connection to people's stories is that the book of Ruth gives us a look at part of the story of the coming of Jesus.

Ruth puts a microscope on the detailed preparation God made for his plan of salvation to be fulfilled. So today we're starting with a look at the book of Ruth.

[2:29] And in all the reading I've done in preparation for today, I've found that this book has repeatedly been described as the perfect story.

And if you're familiar with the story, you might agree. If Ruth's story is new to you, it would be a great idea to read through it and familiarise yourself with it as we go through the next few weeks. It might surprise you to know that across the four chapters of Ruth, there are only 85 verses in total. So it's well within the one or two cups of tea or coffee range to sit down and read.

And of course, if you don't have a Bible of your own, please do let us know and we'd be happy to give you one to keep. When starting a study of a Bible book, it's always helpful to learn a little of the background to the book.

So before we look at the text that we've read this morning, Ruth is found, as you know, in the Old Testament between the books of Judges and 1 Samuel.

[3:32] And we saw earlier in the opening verse, Ruth chapter 1, In the days when the Judges ruled, there was famine in the land.

This tells us when the story occurred, but not necessarily when the book was written or who wrote it. These are good things to know, of course, and for much of the Bible, we do know the answers to who wrote it and when it was written.

It's a very important question, but with Ruth, we don't know the answer to either of those questions. But the really important question to address to any Bible book is why it was written.

And we certainly do know the answer to that, as we've just mentioned. It's a story of a family from Israel and a pointing towards the coming of Jesus. We'll touch on that a bit this morning, but it will be unpacked more thoroughly by will as we go through the rest of this wonderful book in the coming weeks.

The book of Ruth has three main characters. Ruth, of course, her mother-in-law, Naomi, and Boaz. Now, we won't meet Boaz today, but he comes in the story in the first verse of chapter 2.

[4:45] Now, people with more patience than me have gone through this book and counted the words of dialogue each person has, and it might surprise you to know that Ruth has the least. She speaks only 211 words, compared to Naomi, who speaks 300, and Boaz, who speaks 500.

Now, some of you might be experiencing, as my wife did, an opinion about a man who speaks more in a book that's named after a woman. But as we'll find out, Boaz has some negotiating to do and some directing of his farm worker to Ruth's benefit, so hopefully we can forgive him.

As we'll see later this morning, Ruth does get the best line in the whole book. As we've already seen that, as Ruth 1-1 tells us, the story is set in the time of the judges.

Naomi and her family move to Moab during a time of famine, and while she's there, Naomi suffers these three terrible losses, where her husband dies and then both of her sons.

Her tragedy is summed up so well in verses 20 and 21. She said to them, Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

[5:58] 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?

The name Naomi means pleasant, but the name Mara means bitter, and it's easy to see why she wanted to call herself by that name because she had much to be bitter about.

And notice that the story does not try to cover up or smooth out any part of Naomi's life, or to somehow justify her suffering. The fact that there was a famine in the land was significant because God has called his people, when God called his people out of Egypt, he promised them a land flowing with milk and honey.

Even before the Exodus began, when God was speaking to Moses in the burning bush, he made this promise and repeats it 20 times throughout the Old Testament.

The last verse from the book of Judges tells us that the people were not experiencing the plenty, that God had promised. In those days, there was no king in Israel.

[7:08] Everyone did just what was right in his own eyes. Now, why would that be? Back in Deuteronomy, God laid out the promised blessing of those chosen people, these people who were to be a light to the nations.

He promised them that if they obeyed his laws and lived his way and worshipped only him, they would know his blessing and his goodness. But they were also warned of the consequences of failing to follow the law and of straying from the proper worship of the one God to the false gods of the nations which would surround them in their land.

So the people weren't following God's ways and living in the cost of that unfaithfulness, and hence the famine. That was the national picture, but played out in the lives of individual families like Naomi and Elimelech and their two sons, Marion and Kilion.

So they left the land and travelled to Moab. It was an unusual choice because Moab had been an enemy of Israel for the whole of Israel's existence.

Balak, king of Moab, was the one who tried to get Balaam, the prophet, to come to his country and curse God's people as they passed through it during their Exodus journey. We read about that in Numbers 22 where, of course, we get the story of the talking donkey.

[8:30] This is the story I was telling the different classes in Oxbang's primary just a couple of weeks ago. As you can imagine, they loved the idea of a talking donkey. And there was more than one reference to Shrek, which, of course, is a whole other talking donkey.

Also, early in the book of Judges, you read that Eglon, king of Moab, invaded and occupied Israel for 18 years until in response to the people's cries of repentance and sorrow, God sent the judge Ehud, the left-handed, to kill King Eglon.

Now that's another fantastic story I wish we had time to go into, but you can read about that later in Judges 3, but not just now because we're still talking about Ruth. But as already seen, Naomi suffers the loss of her husband and in the next 10 years, both of her sons die.

Her sons have married Moabite women and Naomi's household is now herself, Orpah and Ruth.

Then in verse 6, she prepares to return to Israel because she has heard that the famine is over and notice that the verse says the Lord has visited his people and given them food.

For us, the word visited might suggest that God popped round with a casserole like a good neighbour in a time of trouble, but you won't be surprised to hear that the word has a much richer

meaning.

[9:53] You can get a good sense of it in Psalm 8, verse 4. This wonderful psalm lifts up a hymn of praise and worship and verse 4 says, What are mere mortals that you should think about them?

Human beings that you should care for them. The word care in this verse is the same as the word visited in our chapter from Ruth. God has intervened in the lives of his people and has provided for them what they need.

An interesting part of this is Naomi's faithfulness. Faithfulness. We've already seen that she has much sorrow and she declared herself as one who has been dealt with bitterly, but she doesn't give up on her trust in the Lord because here she is seizing on the demonstration of his provision, even while not understanding how she has experienced such tragedy.

She's attributed Israel's blessings only to the Lord. In hard times, faith will sometimes mean leaving unanswered questions in the hands of God.

Such faith will be strengthened by keeping in the front of our minds the way that God has blessed us in the past. Faith is a journey of trust and growth. It's a moving mobile, not a still life.

[11:10] And when some parts swing for a time into the shadow, we trust that they will also emerge into the light as they have many times before. Part of Israel's worshipping tradition was to meditate on the great acts of God in the past and we can learn from them how we can help to keep our faith alive in dark times.

Well, we've talked a lot about Naomi and rightly so. She was a person of resilience and faithfulness, but now it's time to talk more about Ruth. I said earlier that she got the best line in the whole book and her decision shapes the events of the rest of Naomi and her life and, as we've seen, becomes an important part of Jesus' family history.

For Orpah, the decision is to go back to her family. Neither hers or Ruth's age is mentioned, but the assumption is that she's still of an age where she can marry again and have children.

It's also a turning point for Ruth. Naomi urges her to go back to her family as Orpah has done and for the same reasons. Naomi, as we've seen, still trusts God despite all that's happened to her, but she could never imagine, we would have to assume, that she thought that God would intervene in her life as he does.

So it seems only sensible for these two young women to start again in the familiar environs of their own country. If we didn't know what was going to happen in the next three chapters, we might agree, but Ruth gives a memorable reply in verses 16 and 17.

[12:46] Don't urge me to leave you or 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. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried.

May the Lord deal with me be ever so severely if even death separates you and me. These words of Ruth resonate with us because of the beauty and flow of the language.

Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people, my people. Your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And maybe, as I have, you've heard them said in a wedding where couples make them as a vow to each other.

But another reason they mean so much to us is because there's something familiar about them.

This is the covenant Ruth makes with Naomi or this covenant Ruth makes with Naomi echoes the covenant that we read earlier in the Old Testament which God made with his people.

There are numerous examples of this promise of course and just one example is when God says to Moses in Exodus chapter 6 verse 7 I will take you to be my people and I will be your God and you shall know that I am the Lord your God who has brought you up out of a, brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

[14:03] Part of this comparison is that Ruth is not pledging something in the future but stating something that she has already done. A faith and identity that are already hers.

She's saying Naomi because your God is my God and your people are my people I will go with you. Ruth's declaration is not only about her commitment to Naomi but her commitment to God.

She's saying that the reason I belong to you is that I belong to God. We have thought then about the two scenes in the beginning part of this story.

Life and losses of Naomi and Ruth and Orpah and Naomi's decision to go back to Bethlehem. Then the declaration from Ruth to stay with Naomi and their journey together. The third scene we'll look at very briefly is their arrival.

We read in verse 22 so Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

[15:06] That last phrase is significant for this story. They arrived at the beginning of the barley harvest and it's significant because it's a sort of a bookend for the start of this chapter.

Naomi and her family are left because of famine and now they return at a time of harvest where the barns will be full and food will be available for all. The physical famine also marks a time of spiritual famine in Naomi's life and we are being given a hint that we are on the verge of a spiritual harvest of God's grace in Naomi and Ruth's life.

A time of plenty is about to begin though neither of them knew it. In the hands of God their future and hope rested on the faith in time of trouble that Naomi's displayed and the honest faithfulness that Ruth showed will soon bear fruit.

We said at the beginning this morning that this was considered to be the perfect story but it's only so because it is God who wrote this story in the lives of these two women and eventually Boaz as well.

If we were writing what we hoped to be a perfect story we'd perhaps not write so much sorrow and uncertainty into it but God in his goodness and wisdom writes our stories as he did for the characters in this book to draw us to him and to cause us to throw ourselves on his mercy to ultimately see his grace and provision in our lives.

[16:31] I pray that for each one of us wherever we are in our journey just now we can trust in the God who sees tomorrow and his love that surrounds us. And just as Ruth was about to play her part in the family of King David and in the story of Jesus we know that God has a purpose for us for his glory and to weave our lives into his greater story of redemption.

Let's pray together. Lord we thank you for this wonderful story and thank you that's in your word for us to read and learn from. We pray that you will help each of us to be open to your purposes for us and to the opportunities you give us to show Jesus in all we do.

We pray these things in Jesus name. Amen. We continue our worship by singing our closing hymn How Firm a Foundation You Saints of the Lord.