

Count the Cost (Ruth 1:1-18)

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[0:00] I want to start by asking, does anyone in here love a good story or is it just me? A lot of us love a good story or maybe a movie or a good book that we can dive into or maybe all of them.

Maybe we like stories, maybe we like movies, maybe we like books and we just enjoy all of those different aspects. But as you think about it, what makes a story good or what makes a book worth reading or what makes a movie just capture our attention?

I think there's some elements that draw us in to make a good story. Stories that draw us in typically have good character development, right? They build up the characters, you get to know them, you feel like you have a relationship with them, you feel like you have known them for quite some time. There's typically a conflict or a problem that arises. And then a resolution. Maybe there's an unlikely love story that develops throughout the movie or story and a solution or a conclusion.

But if a story is really good, it doesn't stop with the ending of the movie, right? It leads you on and it helps you look forward to the story continuing, to the story having a place and a greater story that is to come.

[1:19] And so if you like these elements, then you're going to enjoy the next six weeks, Evan, six weeks you're going to enjoy as we look at the book of Ruth and we make our way through it.

However, as we study Ruth, I want to encourage you not to see it as some fictional fairy tale or a fable with a good moral to it that we can hopefully gain something from.

But understand that this story is historical, that this story actually happened. It took place in real time and a real place.

And so we want to see it as that and hopefully that will help us strengthen our faith in God. But understanding that this story is a part of a greater story.

Now, Ruth is one of those books of the Bible that most of us are familiar with. I think most of us on at least a superficial level are familiar. We've at least heard of the book of Ruth.

[2:20] And many of us could hit the highlights and name the major characters that are in the book of Ruth. But I think few of us have thought very deeply about what it can teach us, about what we can gain from this.

I feel like if we were to be asked a series of questions about the book of Ruth, many of us would know the answers, but it would just be some of that information. And so as we prepare to study this book, I want to give you a few reasons of why it's important for us to study books like Ruth, to study books that really connect us with other books.

And so to begin with, Ruth helps connect Scripture. It helps connect Scripture. The Bible is a story. It's a single story of God's redemption where Jesus is the hero.

And all of these little stories like Ruth fit into the larger story. So we need to take time to see how the stories like Ruth pave the way for the coming Messiah.

And it's my hope and prayer that as we work our way through the book of Ruth, that this will be something that is very clear. It'll be something that we'll be able to very easily see how this plays into the greater story.

[3:40] It'll be something where we don't have to use our imagination, but it will be clear and consistent as we work our way through that this story is a part of the greater story that is pointing us towards Jesus.

But also books like Ruth can encourage us. This book is very honest about challenges and difficulties and hardships that both Ruth and Naomi and others experience in this book.

It's a great reminder that God is always there with us. You see, there are no miraculous events that happen in the book of Ruth. This isn't a book like Jonah where you'll see a great fish swallowing up someone and then spitting them up on dry ground.

It's not a story like you see in the book of Exodus where God is providing manna each and every day for people. It's not a story like in Exodus again where you'll see a sea that is parted and people are able to walk through on dry ground, but it is a story that is very real and open and honest about difficulties that they are experiencing, but also the fact that God is at work.

And it's not, even if there's not a miracle that takes place, even if there's not a big dramatic event that takes place, God is still at work in the midst of that everyday ordinary life that has difficulties, that has hardships.

[5:07] He's not pulled himself out of those situations, but he's right there in the middle of it. And what we get to see is that God not only is in the middle of it, but he's bringing, he's working in those situations.

We also see that God is concerned with the nations from the book of Ruth. And we can be encouraged that he is still concerned and he commissions his children.

The gospel is not just for Jewish people, but for the whole world, including Moabites like Ruth. What is so encouraging is not only that God allowed Ruth to become part of his people, but what is so powerful is he takes it a step further and uses her as a vital part of his plan of redemption.

But finally, we study books like Ruth because of the models they provide for godly character as well. One commentator noted a few examples. He says, Ruth reminds us to be loyal, sincere, gracious, courageous, and devoted.

He said, Boaz gives us a model of manhood, justice pursuing and not passive, compassionate and not abusive. But in order for us to really get the most out of this book and many books like this in the Old Testament, we have to understand the context and understand the background in which they take place.

[6:34] You see, Ruth takes place at the same time that the book of Judges takes place. And Judges is the period of time from the death of Joshua to the beginning of the monarchy, to the beginning of King Saul coming onto the picture.

And during this time, there was a famine in the land that was taking a toll. So much so that Elimelech and his wife Naomi decided to take their sons and sojourn in the land of Moab.

Now, Moab is to the east of the Dead Sea and is in what would be considered modern day Jordan. And so during this time, tragedy strikes this family. Moab starts with the death of the father, Elimelech.

Then Naomi's sons marry Moabite women and tragedy strikes this family again as she witnesses the death of her sons. And she begins to make her way back to Bethlehem with one of her widowed daughter-in-laws, Ruth.

And then you quickly see a very unlikely love story that begins to unfold. And like many love stories, we like to see and celebrate two very unlikely people fall in love.

[7:47] You know, we love these stories of unlikely loves that take place. For example, if you look a lot of the Disney movies, you'll see a beautiful young girl and this monstrous beast fall in love in Beauty and the Beast.

And you have a stepchild who's forgotten by everybody, falls in love with a prince and Cinderella. Or possibly the sound of music where a failed nun and an army captain fall in love and they get married.

And so we love these stories of unlikely people coming together. And one of the things that Tony Morita notes, he says, if you like these types of stories, he says, then welcome to Ruth.

Here's two very unlikely people get together, an Israelite gentleman and a Moabite widow. And she ends up being one of the many times great grandmothers of Jesus, which makes this also an excellent lead in to Advent.

And so we're going to be looking at the story of Ruth all the way up to Advent. And so as we make our way to the coming of Jesus, we're going to end Ruth by looking at this lineage and recognizing the significant role this Moabite widow played in the lineage of Jesus.

[9:07] And so we're reminded and encouraged by all of these things. But one of the things that we also must realize is the setting that this takes place. Again, we said it was written at the setting is at the time of the judges, but it was written probably well after that, given the lineage and given the reign there at the end of the book.

And so what we see is that this was written after the judges, but it was written about a time during that. And so what you begin to see is this setting really giving us an idea of how to understand the

book of Ruth.

What I found interesting is the placement of the book of Ruth in many texts. For us in our Bibles and some other translations in Greek there, it takes place, it's set right, it's placed right in between Joshua and 1 Samuel, which makes a lot of sense chronologically.

But when you take some of the Hebrew texts, you'll realize that the book of Ruth is typically in one of three locations in those Hebrew canons. Some of it actually place it at the beginning of Psalms. And so the beginning of Psalms, we're reminded of this significant role that Ruth played in the lineage of the great psalmist of Israel, King David himself.

[10 : 29] And then also some other canons placed it right after Song of Solomon, reminding us of the beautiful love story that takes place in the book of Ruth.

But where most often you will find the book of Ruth placed in Hebrew canons is actually right after Proverbs. And so what chapter does Proverbs end with?

Proverbs 31, correct? Proverbs 31 is the description of this virtuous woman. And so what you see are many of the characteristics that are listed as this virtuous woman are true in Ruth's life.

And so as we look at all of these things, it's helpful for us to think about, but what is most helpful is to place it during this time of the judges. And so as we look at the time of the judges, what we'll see is that judges describes what is happening to Israel on a larger scale, where it affects many different people.

And then in Ruth, you see what this time period, what happens to an individual family and how God continues to work in their life. And so when we look at the book of Judges, we'll be able to set the context for this.

[11 : 46] And so actually the first place that I want to read is not in Ruth, but I want to invite us to look at Judges chapter 2, and we're going to read verses 10 through 13.

And I believe this passage will help us tremendously set the stage. Listen to Judges chapter 2, verses 10 through 13. It says this, And they went after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them and bowed down to them, and they provoked the Lord to anger. So this is the setting for the book of Ruth. A time when people were not teaching their children the truth of God. When people were turning to other gods and turning their backs on the true God, and they were rightfully experiencing the wrath of God.

And it seems from this, and the promises that you'll find in Deuteronomy as well, that Israel was experiencing a famine because of it. And so as we work our way through the book of Ruth, we're going to move from scene to scene.

And so the first scene I want us to look at, and we'll call it this, leaving Bethlehem or see the problem. So leaving Bethlehem and seeing the problem.

[13 : 21] And we're going to find this in verses 1 through 5. And so if you have a copy of God's Word, or if you had an opportunity to pick up one of these journals, I want to invite you to follow along as we read the first five verses to begin with.

It says this. It says, In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem and Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab.

He and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife was Naomi. The names of his two sons were Malon and Kilion.

They were Ephrites from Bethlehem in Judah, and they went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives. The name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other, Ruth. They lived there about 10 years, and both Malon and Kilion died so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

[14 : 26] And so what we see to begin with is there's a significant famine in Israel, and it's to the point that it has reached Bethlehem. And I say this is significant, that it's reached Bethlehem, because Bethlehem actually means the house of bread.

And so there is no bread in the house of bread because of this famine that is taking place. As I was thinking about that this week, my mind immediately went to a text I got from Josh not too long ago. If you have a youth or get those texts from him, you may have also received this text, but it wasn't too long ago. They were coming back from a trip where they spent overnight somewhere, and they were on their way back, and we got a text saying, hey, we're going to be a little late.

We stopped at Subway to get something to eat, and they were out of bread. And I think if you're at Subway and you're out of bread, you should just lock the doors, because there's nothing else to serve, all right?

I mean, all it is is sandwiches. And so when I think about the significance of this famine, it's telling us that this famine has reached Bethlehem, the house of bread.

[15 : 33] There's no bread in the house of bread. And so Elimelech wanted to find a solution to this. What you see here is a man, a father, a husband who is desperate.

He wants to provide for his family. There's a famine, and he wants to figure out a solution to his problem. But the problem with his solution is that it goes against God's plan.

The fact that Elimelech headed across the Jordan to Moab, east of the Dead Sea, suggests that this was a localized famine for the nation of Israel, because where he's traveling to is actually not very far away.

It's a place that you could walk to within a week. And so he's traveling to a land that's not too far away, and it lets us understand that this is a localized famine for the people of Israel.

And according to Deuteronomy, if the people would repent, God would withdraw his anger and lift the famine. It seems, however, that Elimelech designed his own solution instead of calling on God for mercy and repenting of his sins and the sins that plagued the nation.

[16 : 44] And so it's easy for us to look at this passage and condemn Elimelech, right? Well, if you had just done what God had said, then there would be a solution to your problem.

If you had just done what he had prescribed you to do, if you had taught this to your kids and their kids, then you wouldn't have this problem that you're in. But how often do we find ourselves in a similar situation?

You see, each of us have a problem that is bigger than a famine. And I can say that with all confidence without even knowing how long this famine took place or how widespread this famine was.

Because our problem that each of us have is a sin problem. And that sin problem isn't just something that affects our today. It's something that affects our eternity.

And so when we understand this, that we have a problem, then there must be a solution to it. And the bigger problem is that we all too often try to fix it on our own.

[17 : 46] We may recognize the fact that we are sinners. But all of a sudden, we start trying to fix it on our own, just like Elimelech's trying to fix his problem. We try to live a good enough life.

Maybe if I just do enough good, maybe if I pray enough, if I come to church enough, if I give enough, if I do enough of all of these things, maybe it will be enough one day. But we all too often recognize that we have a problem, but we don't go to the right place for the solution.

You see, a lot of times if we were to understand our problem and respond to someone who asked if we know that we're going to heaven, and if our response sounds something like, well, I hope so, I hope I've done enough good to maybe outweigh my bad, then that response is the response of someone who is trying to fix this problem on our own.

That response is someone who's trying to do enough good. If you say, are you going to heaven, and your response is, I hope so, I guess we'll see one day, then that response is coming from someone who's trying to fix this problem on their own.

They're trying to be good enough, do enough good, so that hopefully one day it might be enough. Instead of resting in the promise of God that gives us salvation only found in Jesus, the one who lived the life that you couldn't so that you could have a relationship with him.

[19 : 14] You see, the gospel isn't morality. It's not doing enough good, but it's resting in the fact that Jesus has lived the life that you couldn't live to give you hope.

Here's the good news. In Jesus, God gives us a righteousness that we cannot get on our own, and that this saving righteousness is received by faith.

It's not something you earn, but it's something that is given to you, and once you have it, it's not something that you can lose. So the question becomes, what is your faith in? Is your faith in Christ, or is your faith in your works?

Is your faith in the finished work of Christ, or is your faith in your works, hoping that one day it may be enough? Because if it's in this, then it will never be enough.

Only one has the power to save. So are you putting your hope in your works or in Christ's finished work on the cross? And listen, no matter if you think that you have gone too far down this road, no

matter if you think you're too far gone, that, you know what, I've just done too much, let me tell you that if you have breath in your lungs, it's not too late to give your life to Jesus.

[20 : 30] And this brings us to the next scene in this beautiful story that we'll finish with, and that is the journey home, or count the cost. And so we look at this journey home, and we count the cost.

We're going to be looking at verses 6 through 18, but let's just start with verses 6 through 9. It says this, At this point, Naomi has heard that things have improved in Israel.

She's heard that things have improved in Judah there, and she's wanting to return home. She decides to return home after she realizes the Lord has visited them. Things are improving.

And so at some point along the way to Bethlehem, whether it's a water break or a stop for a rest or maybe even a stop for the night, again, this is about a hundred-mile journey, and so it would have taken, you know, five to seven days for them to walk.

And so somewhere along this journey, she sits them down and says, Hey, you really need to return home. It's time for you. I appreciate what you've done for my sons. I appreciate what you've done for me.

[22 : 16] But now it's time for you to return home. In verse 10, it says, And they said to her, No, we will not return with you. 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 until they are grown?

Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters. For it is exceedingly bitter for me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.

At first, neither Orpah nor Ruth want to turn back and leave their mother-in-law. But Naomi pleads with them. She encourages them. She shares with them that it would be better for them to return home.

[23 : 18] And what we see next is that she is partially successful in her pleading. Picking up in verse 14, it says, Then they lifted up their voices and wept again.

And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, 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. For 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.

Now this is one of the most famous passages in the first chapter of Ruth, right? This is the part that we've all heard. You know, where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. And a lot of times, you know, that's just that love that you have when you first get married.

[24 : 27] That's kind of an affirmation of the vow. You know, when you first go to your newly wedded spouse's family and you meet all the people, all the crazy aunts and uncles that go along with it, and you get back in the car and in an act of love, you just go, Your people will be my people.

But in all seriousness, when we get to this passage, we're reminded of the importance of the cost that is to following God. Naomi is telling them to count the cost.

You know, I've never been good at really counting the cost of certain things and saving my money.

In fact, my parents used to always tell me, Well, that money's just burning a hole in your pocket.

And it's something that they still tell me sometimes. But I can remember one time that I was really trying to save my money up for something. I was young, probably six or seven years old.

And there was a tackle box that I saw that I really wanted. This was a beautiful tackle box, and it came with a little bit of tackle in the box.

[25 : 35] And I was like, I want this. And it was \$10. And to me, \$10, it might as well have been \$100. And so I was like, I'm going to save my money up for this.

I'm going to work hard. And I started saving and saving. Just a little bit here and there. It took me a while to get up to a couple dollars. And I'll never forget, I got to go over to my aunt and uncle's house, my aunt Connie and Uncle Ray's house.

And I was helping them in the garden. And I was telling my cousin, Levi, who was a little bit older than me, about this tackle box that I was trying to save up for. Now, Levi, he was older.

He had a job. \$10 wasn't a big deal to him. And so he's like, well, I'll help you out with that. And he had \$10 in change in his room. And so we go to his room.

He starts counting out quarters and dimes and nickels. We are very quickly getting to \$10. And all of a sudden, my aunt walks in. She goes, well, what's going on? And I told her, I was like, I'm getting ready to buy a tackle box.

[26 : 34] I've been saving up for this tackle box. Levi is helping me get to this goal overnight almost. I mean, just immediately, I could see the tackle box. I was ready to go fishing. And then my aunt says, Levi, you can't do that.

I'm like, whoa, what? Why can't he do this? But she's like, he's not going to learn to save up. He's not going to understand the cost of this.

If there's not something involved, he's not going to understand the cost of this. At the moment, I did not appreciate that. But that's something now that I can see.

She was telling me very clearly that when we are going to follow up for something, we've got to count the cost. And so Ruth and Orpah are given a clear example of counting the cost of discipleship.

Naomi lays it out for them. She just says, I don't have anything to offer you. I have no other sons, none on the way. Even if I got married today, I conceived sons, and you waited nine months for them to be born, you still wouldn't want to wait for them to be old enough to get married.

[27 : 40] She's telling him, I have no future to promise you. It would be better for you to go home to your families, and so you could just start all over. To me, this sounds very familiar to the times when Jesus told those wanting to follow him to count the cost.

He says, those who follow me won't have a place to lay their head. You're going to need to sell everything you have, and then follow me. Let the dead bury the dead. You need to follow me. You know, it's easy to follow Jesus if it doesn't cost you anything. If your idea of following Jesus means nothing in your life changes, then all that means is that you don't like the idea of hell. It means you don't understand the gospel. But I want to encourage you, that can change today. I want to invite you to seriously consider three questions as we close.

First of all, do you see your need? It was very easy for Naomi and Elimelech to see the need they had. They had no bread.

[28 : 45] And so they wanted to figure out what that next step would be, so they tried to solve the solution on their own. I want to encourage you. Do you see your need in your life?

Do you see the fact that you are a sinner, and there's absolutely nothing you can do to save yourself? And then kind of going along with those things is, are you trying to save yourself? Are you trying to find a solution to that in your works or in the finished work of Christ? But the next question, after you see your need, is I want you to ask, have you counted the cost? Have you counted the cost of following Jesus? And then finally, are you ready to make a decision? You see, many times I feel like people in areas where being a Christian is expected, and let's face it, often celebrated like it is in the South at times, we live at the crossroads where Naomi is with Ruth and Orpah.

We understand who God is. We understand our need to follow Christ. We have even started counting the cost. And we know that we shouldn't reject Jesus.

[29 : 53] We know that's not the right answer. But we're not quite ready to give up following and living for ourselves to live for Jesus and follow after him. You know, we know that rejecting Jesus is not what we should do, but we're not quite ready to follow him either.

We've counted the cost, and there's a few things that we want to do before we start following him, before we go all in on this. But here's the thing. Not making a decision is a decision.

Not making a decision is not an option. Because when you don't make a decision, your decision is that you're not following Christ. I want to encourage you today.

If you've been trying to fix your sin problem by coming to church enough, giving enough, being good enough, it may be time to make a decision. Now, don't get me wrong. There's a cost to following Jesus.

And the cost may not make sense to the rest of the world, but following Jesus is worth it. You see, the cost is great, but the gain is greater.

[31 : 02] The cost is significant, but what we have by following him is so much greater than anything and everything this world has to offer.

However, maybe you've decided to follow Jesus years ago. You did count the cost, but for some time, the draw of this world has been strong, and you need to affirm that commitment that you made years ago.

Maybe you counted the cost, and you realize, hey, I want to follow Jesus. Following him is worth it. And for a while, you did that. But here lately, that draw from the world has been great.

Maybe you need to just reaffirm and see that Jesus is your greatest treasure and follow him with everything you have. Wherever you are, I want to encourage you to see God as the answer, count the cost, and follow him.

Father, we thank you so very much. We thank you for all of Scripture. Lord, we thank you for those places where the gospel is just laid out for us as clear as it can be.

[32:07] But also, Lord, we thank you for these stories like Ruth, these narratives that remind us over and over again of your faithfulness, that remind us that following you is worth it, that remind us even when life is difficult, even when we have hardships that we are facing in this life, even when the miraculous doesn't take place, Lord, following you is worth it.

And so, Lord, help us to see you in the midst of that. Help us to understand who you are. Help us to see our need clearly today, but also to clearly see the path and the way that you have made for us to have a relationship with you, to take care of our greatest need, and that is only found in you.

So, Lord, help us to see you clearly. Help us to count the cost. Help us to realize that entering a life-changing relationship with you changes our life.

So, Lord, help us to count the cost and help us to follow you with everything that we have. Lord, we thank you so very much for Jesus, and it's in his precious name we pray.

Amen. I'm going to invite you to take your hymnal and turn to hymn number 588, Sanctuary. If the Lord is speaking to you this morning, won't you respond as we stand together and sing?