

God Uses Crooked Sticks to Draw Straight Lines

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Date: 28 April 2024

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[0 : 00] The story of the delightful little book of Ruth is a very welcome respite in what would otherwise be a very sad story of spiritual decline. It comes immediately after the book of Judges, what is perhaps the most depressing book in the Bible, recording as it does the chaotic freefall of God's people into immorality and unfaithfulness. Judges, the page before actually ends on a very sad note. In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

But not everything was bad in those days because a sovereign God was still using crooked sticks to draw straight lines. The book immediately after Ruth is 1 Samuel, which charts the rise to power of King David, Israel's greatest ever king and from whom is descended the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. From the depravity of Israel's unfaithfulness to God, God, through bringing an outsider called Ruth together with a faithful Israelite called Boaz, is working to restore His people to Himself and to build a new kingdom of grace and righteousness through David. God is using crooked sticks to draw straight lines. He's working behind the scenes to bring joy out of misery and salvation out of unfaithfulness. Now, in first glance, the heroes of this story are Boaz and Ruth, but actually, behind it all, God is the ultimate hero. He always is because it's God who was working all things together for the good of His people. There are plenty of moral and spiritual lessons we can take from the book of Ruth, and we'll learn many of them as over the next few Sunday evenings we go through this book together. But the ultimate destination of this book is the reign of King David, and through Him, the birth, life, death, resurrection, and reign of our Savior Jesus Christ.

This evening from Ruth chapter 1, I want us to see three things. From verse 1 through 5, misery in Moab. Second, from verse 6 to 18, reality in return. And thirdly, from verse 19 to 22, barley in Bethlehem. Remember, all the way through, God is using a crooked stick to draw a straight line. And the straight line He is drawing in Ruth leads directly to King David, and from King David to King Jesus. First of all, then, we have misery in Moab. Misery in Moab from verse 1 to 5. So, as verse 1 tells us, the book of Ruth is set in the days of the Judges, leaders like Deborah, Gideon, and Samson.

One of the commentaries I have on Judges is entitled, Distressing Days of the Judges. Perhaps it would be better titled, Depressing Days of the Judges. Because during those years, the entire nature of Israelite society is breaking down. There's unfaithfulness to God on a national scale.

[4 : 01] The judges themselves are almost indistinguishable from their pagan enemies. So, Jephthah, he offers his daughter as a human sacrifice, something only pagans at that time would do.

The teachers of Israel, the priests and the Levites, are entirely corrupt, and the twelve tribes of Israel are at war with each other. Well, into this situation, a famine strikes. A famine was a mark of God's curse upon His unfaithful people. It's ironic in verse 1 that our passage begins in Bethlehem. The word Bethlehem means the house of bread. If anywhere should have bread, it should be Bethlehem, the house of bread, but there was none there. God is frowning upon His people with the aim of drawing them back to Himself in repentance and faith. But rather than return to God, this man called Elimelech, together with his wife Naomi and their two sons, Machlon and Chilion, flee to the nearby country of Moab, where there's food aplenty. They don't intend to stay there long. In verse 1, they went to sojourn there. But while they're there, Elimelech's sons meet Moabite woman, and they get married. The name Elimelech means, my God is king. Ian could have told us that. My God is king. But Elimelech is acting as though God really weren't king at all. He's run away from the promised land. He's allowing his sons to marry foreign women. Both these things are expressly prohibited under Mosaic law. But things seem to be going fine for the family. But then Elimelech dies, followed soon after by his sons, Machlon and Chilion. After 10 years of what should have been a very short stay, disaster has struck, and Naomi is left picking up the pieces of her life.

Her family's given up on God, and look where it's eventually led. You have three miserable widows in Moab. Now, perhaps Naomi had nothing to do with the decision to leave Bethlehem in the first place, but she's left miserable. What seemed to be a good idea to run away from God turned out to be a disaster.

[6 : 48] You know, for us, when times are tough, and it's hard to be a Christian, we think that running away from God is the best option. No more of that cross-bading. No more of that self-denial required. I can just get on with being a normal person, doing what normal people do.

But though we might give up on God, God never gives up on us. Eventually, what we thought was greener grass will rot and make us sick. We'll end up more miserable than we started.

The message for us in these verses is this, Elimelech was doing what everyone else in Israel was doing at the time. He was doing what was right in his own eyes. Look what it led him. Look what it led those he loved. There's no hope. There's only misery in Moab. And you know, yet God's not finished with Naomi, nor with her daughters-in-law. In fact, He's only started. Even though Elimelech was unfaithful in what he chose to do, the sovereign God is using Elimelech's crooked unfaithfulness to draw Ruth the Moabite into the story. And through her, eventually David the king. And through him, eventually Jesus, the king of kings.

See how God is using crooked sticks like Elimelech to draw straight lines? Yes, even the unfaithfulness of His people in the distressing and depressing days of the judges. So, we have misery in Moab.

Well, then second, from verses 6 to 18, we have reality in return, reality in return. The key word in these verses is to turn or to return. As Dylan said, times, they are changing.

[9 : 11] Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem because she's heard through the grapevine that the famine is over and that God is blessing Israel again. She takes her daughters-in-law with her and she begins the journey. Now, perhaps for Naomi, this wasn't a big life-changing event, but for Orpah and Ruth, this was huge. They're both foreigners to Israel. They don't have a clue what to expect when they get there. And so, Naomi urges them to return home. She says, go return to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you've dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of her husband. At last, some mention of the Lord, not from the mouth of Elimelech, whose name means, my God is king, but from that of his wife. Naomi's daughters-in-law object, but finally one of them, Orpah, having kissed Naomi, returns home to Moab.

Then we read one of the most remarkable little clauses in the Bible, the end of verse 14, Ruth clung to her. Ruth clung to her. Or as in the old version, some of us may remember it, Ruth cleaved to her. Ruth was so loyal to her mother-in-law that she wouldn't leave.

And there follows the kind of speech which moves our hearts. She says, do not urge me to leave you or 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 shall be my God. Where you die, I'll die, and there I'll be buried.

May the Lord do so to me and more also, if anything but death parts me from you. It's remarkable for so many reasons, not the least of which is, at the same time, Israel is running away from God, a Moabite is running toward God. At the same time, insiders to the covenant are trying to get out, an outsider to the covenant is trying to get in.

Ruth is leaving her land behind her, her family behind her, and most important of all, her gods behind her. Rather like Abraham, she's going to the land the Lord her God will show her.

[11 : 53] She's embracing her new family, and most of all, having left the gods of Moab behind her, she's embracing the Lord, the God of Israel. The key words in this passage are turn or return.

It's the same word the New Testament uses to translate the words repentance and conversion. To use New Testament language, Ruth has been converted. She has turned away from the gods she used to follow back home in Moab, and she has embraced the Lord God of Israel. Your God shall be my God.

As we'll discover as we go through the book, there were others in Israel proper who were still followers of the Lord, people like Boaz, but their number is added to by one more. Not this time a Jew, but a Moabite, an outsider. You see how great was the cost of her conversion?

Her conversion meant she left her home, her family, her gods, her security, her status, and her safety. Even as during the depressing days of the judges, it would seem that there was no good news. There was good news on the road from Moab to Bethlehem. A lady is converted called Ruth,

through whom the whole world will be forever changed, for from her womb shall come King David, and from him shall come King Jesus.

She carefully counted the cost of converting, but she clung, she cleaved to Naomi, and she said, your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. It's going to mean that she'll be treated as an outsider for the rest of her life, for all the way through the book of Ruth, she is called Ruth the Moabitess, but it's worth it for her and for us. Ruth might be a crooked stick to begin with, but God is going to use her to draw a straight line to Jesus, and all because, first and foremost, He has brought her to know Himself as Lord. She is one of the most outstanding figures of biblical faith, she stands tall above all the judges of Israel, for whereas I am not aware that any of the judges are mentioned in the family tree of our Lord and Matthew, Ruth is there.

[14 : 42] Ruth reminds us, does she not, of what Jesus said about the Roman centurion, who called, of what Jesus said about that Roman centurion who called Jesus to help His servant.

But Jesus said, I have not found such faith, even in Israel. But what's the message for us today? It is not merely that God uses crooked sticks to draw straight lines, but that outsiders are welcome to share in the blessings of God's people through faith in Him.

Ruth was an outsider. One of the judges of Israel was called Ehud, common Jewish name, Ehud. He was remarkable because he was a lefty, a left-hander. We read about him in Judges chapter 3. Ehud delivered the people of Israel from their slavery to Eglon, and Eglon was the king of Moab. So Ruth was not merely an outsider. She belonged to an enemy nation.

But she, an ethnic enemy of the people of God, has by faith become a child of God, and she's a sharer now in the grace of God's covenant blessings.

[15 : 59] This is one of the chief messages of the book of Ruth, as we're going to see. God calls outsiders to share in the blessings of His kingdom of grace. And this is one of the reasons that we're so very fond of the book of Ruth, because it is laced through with the gospel of God's grace. Ruth the Moabitess, grieving, lonely, and desolate, is accepted as a child of God, and as we'll see, becomes a mother in Israel.

So for that reason, this is a great encouragement to our evangelism as a church. There may be many people in our society who think they don't really belong in the church or in the Christian faith, and so they're hesitant about accepting our invitations to come because they don't know what to expect in here, or they're afraid of not being accepted by us because they're different. They've grown up without God in their lives, and they don't think, that God would want them now. How different the reality. Throughout the gospels, we learn that Jesus loved the outsiders, people with leprosy, the demon-possessed, the cursed, the foreigner.

God loves outsiders like Rahab the prostitute, Naaman the Syrian, Ruth the Moabitess. Each finds a welcome place in His kingdom. He invites them to belong, and in the same way as a church, we want to encourage those who at present feel on the outside to belong. We want to tell them about a God who invites them to believe in Him and to belong to Him. But we also want to remind those on the inside of God's covenant community that they too need to experience God's grace and salvation for themselves. The Israelites of Ruth's day were unfaithful to Him. They were worshiping foreign gods.

Though they were on the inside, they had spiritually become the outside, while Ruth who was on the outside became spiritually on the inside. And the difference between them was faith in God. We cannot and we must not trust to being brought up in a Christian country and in a Christian home for our salvation. We must ourselves cling to Christ, cleave to Christ as Ruth cleaved to Naomi.

[18 : 46] Through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, experience God's grace and love for ourselves. So, we have reality in return. Well, thirdly in this chapter, we have barley in Bethlehem from verse 19 to 22, barley in Bethlehem. Like a play with three acts, Act 1 being in Moab, Act 2 being on the journey, Act 3 is situated back in Bethlehem, the house of bread. You know, villages don't change.

For all that Naomi had been away from Bethlehem for 10 years, she was still a local. When I go back up north to Galsby to my home village, I'll walk down the street and I see people I went to school with who I haven't seen for 35 years. And they'll say to me, oh, hi, Colin. And then bletcher with me as though I'd never left 35 years ago, talking about things we talked about back then. I'm still a local to Galsby, even though I've been away for so long. And the same was true for Naomi. She is still a local.

And so when she returned with a Moabite woman in tow, there was a great fuss. Not so much because Naomi had come back, because it was as if she just left yesterday and just picked the conversation up, but because of the girl she'd brought with her. The Naomi they met, however, was very different from the Naomi who'd left 10 years before. She didn't want to be called Naomi anymore. She's self-identified as Marah, which is the Hebrew word for bitter, bitter. Naomi knows that she and her husband had been wrong to have left Bethlehem in the first place, that they'd been disobedient to God's promise or provision, and she was guy bitter about it. They'd left Bethlehem, but God hadn't left Bethlehem, and now the barley's back. God has lifted His curse upon the land, and though Naomi is empty, the land is now full, and life could begin again. God is using a crooked stick to bring Naomi and Ruth back to Bethlehem and to Him. It may have been a stock of barley or a few hundred of them, but they've come, and just at the right time, for we read in the last verse, they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. The question is, what's going to happen next? Naomi didn't know.

Neither did Ruth, nor did anyone else for that matter. Only God knows what's going to happen in chapter 2. Well, as we close, I want to focus just briefly on four applications, four applications. The first is to drive home to us the sovereignty of God in this whole story, the sovereignty of God. This is not ultimately a story about Ruth and the decisions she makes, but about God and His purposes for His people. Israel as a whole might be in a spiritual mess, but even now, God is working to restore His people. Ultimate deliverance for His people shall not come through powerful warriors like Gideon and Samson, but through a foreign woman, a Moabitess called Ruth. God is working out His plan.

[22 : 24] Even in the darkest days, and this is difficult to believe for all of us, even in the darkest days, we need to be confident that God is still in control and He knows what He is doing with our lives. Yes, even using crooked sticks to draw straight lines.

Second application is to re-emphasize the point that God is for the outsider. God is for the outsider. Ruth was a Moabite. We learn from the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 verse 5 that Boaz was also half Gentile. His mother was Rahab from Jericho. God uses both Rahab and Ruth in His divine purposes of love and grace. God is for the outsider. It might seem from some of the books of the Old Testament that God hates foreigners, but it's not so. He's for the outsider. Jesus was an outsider, and in many ways we are too, if we're Christians. God is doing a powerful work of grace in nations which we considered not just un-Christian, but anti-Christian. He is bringing into His church millions of outsiders. No one is outside the reach of His grace, not even the hardest among us. Nobody is outside except those who choose to remain outside by rejecting His offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ the Lord.

Yesterday I was on the phone to one of my best friends who works for the Langham Partnership, and last month he was in Ethiopia talking to a church leader there about what kind of books his denomination needed published in the language of Ethiopia. And when he was speaking to the church leader there in that church leader's office, he was speaking about these books and about who could print them and who could write them and who could publish them. And then at the end of the conversation, he happened to say to this Ethiopian church leader, as a matter of interest, how big is your denomination? How big is your denomination?

So the Free Church of Scotland is about 10,000 people in it, okay? And we tend to think, don't we, that the sun rises and sets in the Free Church of Scotland, okay? And this church leader from Ethiopia looked at my friend Colin McPherson in the eye and said, well, we're doing quite well. We have only about 9.6 million people in our denomination. 9.6 million in one denomination in Ethiopia. As Colin walked out of that church leader's office, he walked into the next office where there was the leader of the Baptist churches of Ethiopia. And again, he had the conversation with the leader of the Baptist churches in Ethiopia and said to the church leader there at the end of his conversation, just as a matter of interest. How big is the Baptist church in Ethiopia? And the Ethiopian church leader of the Baptist churches there said, well, we're doing quite well. We have 8.4 million members of our denomination in

Ethiopia. We are not the center of the universe, and the church does not rise or fall on the Free Church of Scotland. God draws outsiders. Perhaps it's we who are actually the outsiders. Well, third application.

[26 : 07] God has given Naomi and Ruth the chance to start again. God's given Naomi and Ruth the chance to start again. God is the Lord of the second chance and the third chance. Naomi

foolishly left Bethlehem behind her, but now she's returned a wiser person, bringing with her one of the great heroes of biblical faith, Ruth the Moabite. Naomi, having left Bethlehem in a time of famine, showed a lack of faith in God's promises and provision. But now God has brought her back at the beginning of barley harvest. God has given her a second opportunity to start again and to develop and grow her faith in God. God's not given up on Naomi. Perhaps there are some of us here this evening who are guy close to giving up on God because we've been unfaithful to Him in one way or another. We need to know that God has not given up on us. God invites us to grasp the opportunity a second chance presents us with. How great His forgiving and restoring grace. If it were not for that, none of us would be still standing. For from the youngest to the oldest of us, in His mercy, He has given us hundreds of opportunities for a new start.

You know, perhaps tonight's the right night to grasp it with both hands and to recommit ourselves to making the most of it. There's always a way back to Bethlehem from Moab. There's always a way back to Bethlehem from Moab. There always is, and it starts with returning to Christ.

And the last application, Ruth is a little bit like a rose among thorns. Not the least reason for which is how when she and Boaz get together and are married, their grandson's going to go on to become Israel's greatest ever king, King David.

Through David, God's going to restore the fortunes of His people and deliver them from their enemies. It was Ruth's grandson who turned back the Philistines. The blood of a Moabite ran in the veins of the writer of Psalm 23. Most important of all, David was the direct ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Moabite blood ran in the veins of Jesus. The importance of this little book of Ruth cannot be overestimated because it forms the crucial stepping stone, not just to the restoration of Israel under David, but to the salvation of the nations under Jesus. Little did they know, Ruth and Boaz, that their great-grandson, many times removed, would die on a Roman cross to take away the sins of the world.

[29 : 17] Little did they know that He would rise from the grave on the third day. Little did they know that He'd be exalted to the highest place, so that at the name of their great-grandson, Jesus, every knee, Jew and Moabite, Scot and Chinese, should bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord.

So, in the heart of a time of deep spiritual decline, God's got a powerful purpose for the salvation of people and peoples. It starts not with judges. It starts not with a Jew, but with a Moabite woman called Ruth. How great our God is, for even in the heart of darkness, the light of God is shining in this book, and that light is still growing stronger, and all because when challenged to go back by her mother-in-law, Naomi, Ruth clung to her and said, where you go, I'll go. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God.