

(1) Kindness and the hand of God

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[0 : 00] Good morning. The reading this morning is Ruth chapter 1, which you can find on page 267. That's page 267, Ruth chapter 1, and beginning at verse 1.

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 Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Marlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. 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's wives. The name of one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth.

They lived there about ten years, and both Marlon 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 : 13] 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 her 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 Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

[2 : 23] 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 will I 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 : 24] So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. Now, thanks very much for reading to us.

As we begin this morning, a new four-talk series looking at the book of Ruth. A book which we'll see is all about the loving kindness of God.

And so our aim over the next four weeks is simple. It's to be blown away by this loving kindness. To marvel at, to savour, to appreciate afresh God's loving kindness to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you're taking notes, the word in the original is *hesed*. It comes up in 1 verse 8, 2 verse 20, 3 verse 10. There is no single equivalent word in English to translate it, but it speaks of a kindness which goes beyond the norm.

A kindness of deep commitment. A kindness which expects nothing in return. It's merciful, it's gracious, it's full of love. This is the sort of kindness we're talking of.

[4 : 42] And it's the heartbeat of the book of Ruth. The loving kindness of God. As we look together at these four chapters, one chapter a week over the next four Sundays, we will see God's loving kindness towards a helpless widow named Naomi, as God transforms her life from emptiness to fullness, from bitterness to joy, from curse to blessing.

We'll see God's loving kindness in the unexpected way he goes about this. Bringing an outsider, a foreigner, a Moabitess named Ruth, into the chosen people of God.

We'll see God's loving kindness in providing food and rest to both Ruth and Naomi, through a redeemer named Boaz. But above all, we are going to see how this story of God's loving kindness to Ruth and to Naomi is actually part of a much larger and much more significant story.

And that is the loving kindness God shows towards all of his people in the Lord Jesus Christ.

People just like you and me. Now, I don't know if you ever doubt God's kindness to you.

If you ever think or feel that, well, I don't feel God's for me, more like God's against me. So there could be redundancy. There could be broken relationships. There could be unfulfilled dreams, damaged hopes, a difficult illness, the death of a loved one.

[6 : 14] And you think, perhaps God's against me. Perhaps God, you know, he doesn't have my best interests at heart. When life is tough, when things don't go your way, when we're facing difficulties, especially when those difficulties are caused by our own sin, it's easy, is it not, to doubt God's goodness, his kindness to us?

Perhaps God's punishing me for this. I know he's in control. He doesn't seem very kind and loving to me at the moment. For all of us, at some stage, attempted to doubt God's kindness to us, which is why the Book of Ruth is such a good tonic to our souls.

Because it is overflowing with God's loving kindness. A loving kindness where God does have our best interests at heart. A loving kindness where God does work out all things for the good of those who love him.

A loving kindness which will drown out any doubts we have. So why don't we pray now and ask God to do just that for us as we come to his word in Ruth chapter 1.

Let me pray for us. Father God, we know that the sword of the Spirit is the word of God. As we ask Father that you would equip us from the Book of Ruth to fight any doubts or misunderstandings or confusions we have about your loving kindness.

[7 : 43] Please feed us from your word this morning. Please fill us with your loving kindness. Help us to have a right view of the kind God that you are.

Give us a right appreciation of your loving, kind plans for the universe. We ask you in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's turn now to chapter 1 of Ruth.

It's page 267. If you've closed your Bibles. Chapter 1 of Ruth is spit up into three scenes.

And these three scenes will make up our three points. In the first scene in Moab we'll see God's loving kindness to Naomi is undeserved. In the second scene on the way back from Moab we'll see that God's loving kindness to Ruth is unexpected.

And then when we get back to Bethlehem in scene 3 we'll see why Naomi is so bitter towards God. There's an outline on the back of the survey sheet if you'd like to take notes. We'll write any questions.

[8 : 48] You may have a question time at the end. First then, God's loving kindness is undeserved. Because in verses 1 to 6 we see the absolutely dire situation into which God begins to act.

In a time of sin and rebellion, both nationally and personally, God graciously acts. Let me read from verse 1. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.

And a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to Sjun 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, Naomi. And the names of his two sons were Marlon and Chilion. Now for those of you who are familiar with Judges or the book of Deuteronomy, I imagine the alarm bells are

going off in your mind right now as you hear these verses.

Does anyone know what the days of the judges were like? It was chaos. Moral chaos. Anarchy. Sinful rebellion against God.

[9 : 57] So just glance across to the last sentence of the book of Judges. You can see it there in verse 25. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

As the book of Ruth opens, this is what it's like. It's some of the darkest times at this stage in Israel's history. There's no king. There's no leader. Everyone's doing as they see fit.

Disobedient to God's word. Rejection of God's rule. It's a time of utter rebellion against God. And in verse 1 you see the land, the roof gets cursed, there's famine.

And what is needed right now is repentance. What is needed is for people to come back to God, to confess their sins, to repent. But what does Elimelech do? Verse 1, he packs his bags and takes his family off to Castor's New in Moab.

One of the spawned enemies of Israel. Repentance? I don't need repentance, I need food. And Moab looks good for that, so let's go there.

[11 : 05] It's a terrible move away from God, away from God's people, away from the source of God's blessing. It's terrible whenever people look to their material needs above their spiritual needs.

Whenever people take their family away from church, from Christian friends, from loving fellowship, for the better job, the bigger home, the safer neighbourhood. But that is what Elimelech did. And in verse 3, he dies.

Verse 3, with Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died. And she was left with her two sons. The focus now turns to Naomi, the head of the family.

Will she return to God? Will she turn back to her land, to her people? Will she repent? No, verse 4. She allows her two sons to marry unbelieving Moabite wives.

Doesn't sound good. And instead of going home, they stay in Moab at the end of verse 4 for another 10 years. More alarm bells.

[12 : 06] Naomi, just like Elimelech, still running from the Lord. And you know what? The curses keep coming. Verse 5. Both Marlon and Chilion died. Moon was left without her two sons and her husband.

What a terrible picture as we start the book of Ruth. Sinful rebellion at the national level. Sinful rebellion at the personal level. And yet, into this dire, sinful, rebellious situation, God acts.

Verse 6. 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.

This is the first time that the Lord is mentioned in Ruth. And one of only two places where God is mentioned in the active tense. And it only serves to highlight his gracious intervention.

Despite the national sin, the Lord lovingly lifts the curse of famine and gives them food. And actually, for Naomi, despite her sin, the Lord's merciful to her, isn't he?

[13 : 20] Sparing her, not killing her off, but using the news of this food in the land to draw her back to him. And so right at the start of this book, a book all about God's loving kindness, we see that God's loving kindness is undeserved.

There's no hint of repentance here from the people who don't deserve the food. There's no hint of repentance here from the rainies who doesn't deserve to be spared. But that's the point. God's loving kindness is undeserved.

It is always God who makes the first move. Always God who takes the initiative. And so like the jilted husband who takes the initiative to go after her unfaithful, that wayward wife, bring her home.

This is just how God acts towards his unfaithful, wayward people. This loving kindness is totally undeserved.

And it's no different to us, is it? For us. God's loving kindness for us from the Lord Jesus is totally undeserved. If we weren't the God making the first move in our lives, we'd have been just like a limelight.

[14 : 31] Just like the two sons, trapped in our rebellion and sin, disobedient, running away from the Lord, facing the famine of God's judgment and eternal death.

There really is nothing good in us that merits God's favour. Nothing. And if you think there is, you're fooling yourself. And you do not deserve God's loving kindness.

But God, being rich in mercy, he could be initiated in our lives. Because of the great love with which he loved us, God did make the first move. God visited us. God drew us to him. God gave us faith in

the Lord Jesus.

He opened our eyes to the truth of the gospel. And he brought us home to him. God's love with us. We didn't deserve this loving kindness. We didn't merit it. But fortunately for us, God does not work on merit.

God works on grace. Sure, unadulterated, unadulterated mercy. So that's the first thing that Ruth is telling us from chapter 1.

[15:31] God's loving kindness is undeserved. Secondly, God's loving kindness is unexpected. Because in verses 7 to 18, on the way back from Moab to Bethlehem, Naomi tries to persuade her two daughters of Noah to return back to Moab and not come with her.

And there's an unexpected response from Ruth at the end. So let me read verse 7 to you. 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 her 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 husbands.

Now clearly Naomi thinks it's better here for Ruth and Orpah to head back to Moab. And you may be thinking, well why? Given what's just happened to her husbands and her sons in Moab, why encourage your daughters-in-law to return there?

[16:53] Well it's as we read on in the dialogue that we pick up some clues that all is not well with Naomi's spiritual health. So in verse 12, Naomi describes herself as hopeless.

Turn back my daughters, verse 12. Go your own way, for I'm too old to have a husband. If I should have hope, say I have hope, but she doesn't think she does, she's hopeless. And then in verse 13, we see Naomi's perspective on the situation, which really gets to the heart of it from her point of view.

But no, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. Turn back. God's hand is harsh.

He's against me. And then in verse 15, after Orpah has decided to return to Moab, and who can blame her after this, we read Naomi say to Ruth, see your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods.

Return after your sister-in-law. Now you put these clues together and you see that Naomi, well she doubts God's goodness, doesn't she? She reckons God's against her, she's hopeless, she's despairing, there's anger, there's self-pity.

[18:11] And it seems from verse 15 that Naomi truly believes that the gods of Moab are a better alternative to the one true God of Israel. Now, we'll consider what's going on with Naomi in the next point, but for now I want us to see how Naomi did the comments here.

I only go to highlight just how unexpected and amazing Ruth's response is in verses 16 to 17. Let me read them to you. But Ruth said, verse 16, 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 will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts me from you.

Isn't that an amazing profession of faith? Even Naomi's anti-evangelism in the previous verses, as there is such a word. Who would have thought Naomi was running after to catch up with Arthur, off back to Moab?

[19:31] You know, that's the thing with God's loving kindness. It's unexpected. Not only is it undeserved, it's also unexpected. Here's Ruth, a Moabite, an enemy, an outsider, who God is drawing to himself.

Such as she says that, Your people shall be my people. Your God, my God. How can Ruth say something like that? Humanly speaking, perhaps she's heard from an emilect, from her husband, about the marvellous things that the Lord has done for his people.

Rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, sending flags on the enemies, parting the Red Sea, providing food, bread from heaven in the wilderness. Perhaps like Rahab before her, news had reached Moab of this almighty God, leading his people to victory.

Destroying cities like Jericho, trampling over enemies, bringing them to a land, flowing with milk and honey. Perhaps Ruth had come to realise, though she would never say it, that her parents had been foolish to leave Israel and come to Moab in the first place.

Who knows? What we do know is that God was at work in Ruth's life. God was drawing a roof. To himself, a coroner, a more vites.

[20 : 45] So that now, with these two options before her, the road to Moab, or the road to Israel, She wholeheartedly takes the road to Israel, to God's people, to God's land, to God himself.

And she gives up everything to follow the God of Israel. Her sister, her family, her country, everything. She keeps it all up to the Lord. Incredible example of wholehearted faith.

I suppose we can take this as an encouragement that May and his famers did not keep Ruth from trusting in God. Your sin won't prevent God from drawing people to himself. But more importantly, I hope we can see that God's loving kindness is unexpected.

It's a theme that will be developed in the book as we continue to see God's work in Ruth's land.

Even an outsider like Ruth can become part of God's people.

So don't limit the bounds of God's loving kindness. Don't think anyone is outside the realm of his grace, of his loving kindness. If you ever think, well, God just couldn't save them. Don't. He can.

[21 : 56] If you ever think, well, it's highly unlikely that this person would become a Christian. Don't. Because God's loving kindness is unexpected. Undeserved, this unexpected, thirdly, God's loving kindness is overlooked.

Because in verses 19 to 22, Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem. As we suggested before, all is not well with Naomi.

Verse 19. 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 women 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.

[23 : 04] There's no exaggeration to say, Naomi is a bitter old woman. Call me Mrs. Bitter, she says. That's my name now.

So bitter am I at what God has done for me. So I wonder what you make of Naomi's outburst. Do you empathise with her brutal honesty before God?

Do you feel some disdain for sounding like a spoiled child? One thing's for sure. Naomi is clear on God's sovereignty.

Naomi believes God's in control. Do you see that? She says, it was God who did this. It was the Almighty who has dealt with me like this. It is the Lord who has brought me back. So Naomi at least is clear that God is absolutely sovereign over all things.

That nothing in this world happens without God allowing it. Every breath we take. Every rain drop that falls. Every second that ticks. The Lord God Almighty is in complete charge of everything.

[24 : 06] Which is certainly something we want to be reminded of this morning. But what Naomi seems to be overlooking is the loving kindness of God.

Yes, God's sovereign. She's right about that. But she's wrong about God's harshness. God is sovereign and he's kind. God is sovereign and he's lovingly kind. But Naomi, she seems to be blind to God's goodness in her life.

God's loving kindness is overlooked. So think about it for a moment. It was only because of God's loving kindness that God spared her life back in Moab.

After ten years of rebellion and turning away from him. I went away full. No you didn't. Unless you mean full of sin. Oh, the Lord has dealt very bitterly with me.

No he hasn't. He's dealt very mercifully with you. Naomi spared your life, don't you see? It was only because of God's loving kindness that Ruth is now clinging to Naomi.

[25 : 07] Where you go, I will go. Where you die, I will die. What a gift from God. But Naomi seems oblivious to it. I'm not sure if you noticed it, but after that most glorious progression of faith by Ruth, do you see how Naomi reacts in verse 18?

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. I mean, nothing. No thanks. No, praise the Lord for his grace in your life.

This is just nothing. The Lord has brought me back empty. No, he hasn't. Look around you. You're still alive. You've got Ruth. You're back home. You're with God's people now.

Open your eyes. It was only because of God's graciousness that Ruth was in the house. No, because of God's gracious provision in the first place that the famine had stopped. And no one had been moved to come back home.

The Lord has brought calamity upon me. No, he hasn't. He's graciously saved you from death. He's unexpectedly given you the gift of Ruth. And he's about to bless you abundantly, as you'll see in the rest of the chapters.

[26 : 14] We only get a little cliffhanger there at the end of verse 22. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. Mainly she's blind to it.

God's love and kindness is overlooked. And she's left bitter. Bitter before the Lord. Now, I don't know what your view of God is this morning as a Christian.

But if for any reason that you think God is against you as a Christian, if you view God as some harsh taskmaster sort of waiting to punish you as soon as you make a mistake, chances are you'll end up like Naomi.

Bitter. They're angry. They feel like life is empty. So if the job offer falls through, and the kids don't get into the right school, and relationships break down, when illness sets in, well, the bitterness will also set in if you view God as harsh and mean.

And this becomes a down that's filed, because as the weeds of bitterness take root in your heart, they blind you to God's love and kindness, and the very thing that can lift you up out of the darkness.

[27 : 27] But what Naomi couldn't see, at least for the moment, that we plan to see.

Because we know how the story of Ruth ends. So flip forward a couple of pages with me to chapter 4, verse 17. If you don't want to know how the story ends, shut your ears now.

But what I think is helpful to do so is to see how Ruth fits into the Bible as a whole. So here we go, verse 17. And the women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, the son has been born to Naomi.

They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now you see, it's just a brushstroke, just one brushstroke, in the masterpiece of God's plan for salvation.

A brushstroke which will take us from Naomi to King David, from King David to King Jesus. And in King Jesus we see the full, complete, and most awesome picture of God's love and kindness towards us.

[28 : 38] What Naomi couldn't see of God's love and kindness, we can see clearly and fully in the Lord Jesus Christ. Because as we know, twelve hundred years later, after Naomi, the Lord visited his people again.

Not to give him physical food, but to give him the spiritual food of eternal life. In the person of Jesus Christ, God visited the world. And as Jesus died on the cross, he paid for sin once for all, as a fourth and final demonstration of God's love and kindness to us.

Yes, God could have dealt bitterly with us because of our sins. Yes, God could have rightly, justly brought calamity on us, consigning us to the emptiness of hell because of our sins.

But marvellously, kindly, lovingly, Jesus Christ took it in our place. The calamity of God's judgment fell on him instead of us. And so God shows his love for us like this.

But while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Now do you see God's loving kindness towards you? Do you doubt God's love towards you this morning?

[29 : 48] Look at the cross, see Jesus dying on your place. See Jesus taking all the punishment that you deserve. See Jesus doing everything needed to bring you home to God.

God is not against you. If you trust in Jesus, God is for you. If you trust in Jesus, you've been brought into God's salvation plan for the world.

And he's at work in you now. Making you more like Christ. Bringing you on to final salvation. God really does have your best interests at heart.

He's not a harsh past master. He's your father now. You belong to him. He loves you dearly as his own son. And as the Apostle Paul said, if God is for us, who can be against us?

Indeed we know that for those who love God, all things work together for our good. God really does have your best interests at heart.

[30 : 49] You can trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. God is not punishing you when things go wrong in your life. And what is a harsh past master? He's not punishing you when you're facing difficulties as a Christian.

Even when those difficulties are caused by your own sins. Now, that's not to say that God may well take us through the deep waters of pain, of suffering.

But that's only to break our hard hearts. That's only to bring us closer to him, the source of true blessing. Yes, he may well discipline us as a father lovingly disciplines his son. He may be emptying us, so to speak, but only so that he can fill us with something much better.

The Lord Jesus Christ himself. So don't overlook the loving kindness of God. Don't become bitter as you lose sight of God's sovereign love to you and Jesus.

A bitter heart will melt before the loving kindness of God. So soak yourself in it these four weeks.

Read the book of Romans. And that's the end of the room.

[31 : 55] Marvel afresh at the cross of Christ this morning. A loving kindness totally undeserved. A loving kindness totally unexpected. And a loving kindness that really will move you to cry out and keep crying out, Your people shall be my people, your God my God.

Let's pray together. Father God, we praise you for your loving kindness to us in the Lord Jesus.

A loving kindness we know we didn't deserve. A loving kindness so unexpected. And yet a loving kindness that we long to treasure all the days of our lives. And so help us by your Holy Spirit to do just that.

In Jesus name. Amen.