

Living with Ambiguity

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Date: 08 May 2011

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[0 : 00] Well, today was one of Dvorah's favourite days of the year. Today was Shavuot, the celebration of the Feast of Weeks.

Yesterday they had gathered all the greenery and the flowers together and they decorated the house with what they'd gathered and they did this to reflect the bringing in of the first fruits. But they also did it because of the ancient stories that the desert bloomed with flowers when the Torah, the law, was given to the Jewish people and then after they had decorated the house, Dvorah went to bed.

And now Dvorah watched her father. She saw the tiredness in his face but she also saw that inward joy and peace and she knew where it came from. For her father had been up all night.

Just as generations before him he had spent the night studying the Torah and now the whole family would go together off to the synagogue. They would hear the reading of the Ten Commandments. And then would come Dvorah's favourite moment.

Together they would read the book of Ruth. Now she wasn't really sure why they did it. Some said it was because the story had taken place during Harvest Festival. Some said they did it because Ruth's conversion was similar to the Jewish people's acceptance of the law.

[1 : 16] Others said it was because Ruth was King David's ancestor and it was believed that David was born and died on Shavuot. But Dvorah didn't care. She was glad to just hear the story.

A whole book of the Bible devoted to a woman. A book about a most unlikely heroine. A book about love. A book about godliness.

A book about God's generous overwhelming love. Yes reading Ruth was the highlight of the day. Of this day to come. And she knew the story backwards.

But it also always surprised her. You see she always learned something new from this book. And today would be a good day. She knew it. Friends my imaginary Dvorah was right.

The book of Ruth is one of the most interesting, most stimulating books in the Old Testament and we're going to spend four weeks on it together. They'll be four great weeks for this is a great book. And I hope that you will fall in love with this book as I do.

[2 : 17] And my prayer is that your lives will be transformed by what we find. However before getting underway we really need to do some hard background work. So you need to stick with me tonight. I'm going to show you some things that perhaps you will not have seen before.

The first thing I want you to do is to understand a key Hebrew word. And those of you who come here regularly to Holy Trinity will hear me use this word over and over again. And if you haven't yet and you stick around us you will hear me use it again and again and again.

And by the end you might even be able to pronounce it. The word occurs at a most, at a critical moment and a number of critical moments in this book. And it's a word that is easily overlooked and neglected.

Now the Hebrew word is that word, yes you guessed it, chesed. Okay, that guttural, back of your throat word, chesed. And in many ways I think it is the word that is used in the Old Testament to describe the character of God.

And you see it used in the Psalms. And so I wonder if you'd open your Bibles with me and open your Bibles at Psalm 136. So Psalm 136.

[3 : 27] And rather than give you a page number, if you opened your Bible, oh no, don't give people page numbers. We need to find out how to look it up. Middle of the book and you'll be in the book of Psalms. Middle of the Bible, book of Psalms.

And then you can look up 136 without a page number. Okay, verses 1 to 3. Oh give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Oh give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. Oh give thanks to the Lord of Lords, for his steadfast love endures forever. Now the word steadfast love is the translation of the Hebrew word chesed.

And scholars struggle to know, well how do we actually translate this word? It's a relational word. It has a sense of spontaneity about it. It has connotations of unexpected, surprising, overwhelming kindness and love.

It's what happens when you've done something towards someone and unexpectedly they turn around and what you've done to them is not very good. And unexpectedly they turn around and give you peset.

[4 : 34] They do something good for you. They're kind, they're generous. It's the sort of thing that God does in the book of Jonah when he unexpectedly and surprisingly forgives the wicked Ninevites who repent.

And mind you, unexpectedly and surprisingly appoints Jonah a second time to bear his message. Chesed is God's overwhelming, surprising, unexpected, spontaneous grace in action.

It is what God does when you'd expect him to act in judgment but what he does is turn around and say, well actually I've got mercy and love for you. But before we leave Psalm 136, I want to show you something else.

I want you to look at verse 1. And I want you to notice the word Lord written in capital letters. Now most of you know what I'm about to tell you but for those of you who don't, it's quite important to notice. Whenever the Old Testament uses capital words for Lord, it is telling us, sorry, capital letters for Lord, it is telling us that in the original, the special name for God is being used.

And that special name we think was pronounced Yahweh. We don't really know because no one for many, many years had actually pronounced it because they didn't want to take the name of the Lord, their God in vain.

[5 : 45] And so they didn't, the best way to avoid that, not ever use the name. And so people forgot how to pronounce it but we think it's pronounced Yahweh. And this is the special name of God and it is often associated with God's character.

Here's Chesed. You can see this, open your Bibles again, at Exodus 34, verse 6. So Exodus 34, verse 6. God gives a special revelation of himself.

In Exodus 34, verse 6, he passes before Moses. By the way, if you're looking for Exodus, Genesis, Exodus, so it's really easy. And 34 again, you can find. He passes before Moses and as he does, he says these words, Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in Chesed and faithfulness.

Friends, the book of Ruth mentions this word Chesed a number of times and it shows God and his people exercising this character of God. And in many ways, I think the book of Ruth is an exploration of this word, this idea, this nature of God.

So with that in mind, just keep in the back of your minds what I've said and it'll help you interpret this book and I'll show you sometimes this word occurs. So with that in mind, that's the first bit of background and I've got some more bits of background.

[7 : 08] I want to tell you a bit about Moabites. Now, there's much I could say but I just want to tell you the crucial things. Let me give you three or four bits of information about Moabites, about Moab and Moabites.

The first bit of information comes from the book of Genesis. You don't need to look it up but in Genesis 19, God rescues Lot and his daughters from Sodom and Gomorrah. And what they do is they take refuge in the mountains around about Sodom and Gomorrah because there's been this sort of almost holocaust that has happened there and the daughters of Lot are without husbands. And so what they do is they make their dad, Lot, drunk. And then they sleep with him and they become pregnant by their father and the firstborn daughter gives birth to a son and she names this son, you guessed it, Moab.

And he is the ancestor of the Moabites. And the second bit of information comes from the book of Numbers. You see, the people of Israel are entering into the promised land, making their way toward the promised land and the Moabites are terrified by the sheer bulk of numbers of this people.

And so Balak, the king of Moab, employs Balaam, a pagan prophet, to curse them. But this fails because God intervenes. And then Balak and Balaam try a second strategy.

[8 : 33] What they do is they conspire to turn the Israelites away from the Lord through, that thing that works so often, sex. sex with their women. And many Israelites fall for their trap and God judges their sin with a great plague.

Can you see, and you can see this great hatred of Moabites in the book of Deuteronomy. I want you to listen to what Deuteronomy says about Moabites. It's in Deuteronomy 23, verses 3 and 4.

No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord even down to the fourth generation.

For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way out of Egypt and they hired Balaam, son of Baor, from Pethor and Aram Naharim to pronounce a curse on you.

However, the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam but turn the curse into a blessing for you because the Lord your God loves you. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live.

[9 : 40] The Moabites, you see, they're not just foreigners. Moabites are the product of incest. They are the avowed enemies of the people of God. They are, if you like, the other.

The sort of people that Israelites despise, hate and keep at a distance. This is the Moabites. So there's the important bits of background for this chapter. Now we can enter into the chapter and I want to take you just for a quick run through it.

The story has three sections. Have a look at it in your Bibles. Have your Bibles open. It's very important for you to follow the text. Check that I'm not lying about it or whatever. Verses 1 to 7. In these verses we're given a setting in Israelite history.

You see, we're given an outline of the main figures of this history and the main problem that the book is going to address. And the setting we're told is the time of judges. It's a time therefore before there were any kings in Israel when God ruled over his people through spirit-empowered judges. And the main three figures here are three women and each are related to a certain man, Ahimelech. And the first woman, well her name's Naomi, Ahimelech's wife.

[10 : 50] And the second is Orpah, a Moabite daughter-in-law to Ahimelech. And the third is Ruth, a second Moabite daughter-in-law to Ahimelech. Now the problem is Naomi's very difficult situation in life.

I mean, you heard it when we read it through, didn't you? This is, you know, a real disaster for this woman. She's in a foreign land. Her husband dies or has died.

Her two sons by that husband have died as well. Therefore, you need to understand this is not the era of social security. She is therefore, she has two dependent women, neither of whom are likely to, candidates for marriage back home because they're Moabites.

Who's going to marry them? And it's hard to imagine a more destitute situation for a woman. And into this situation comes news from Israel. The Lord has visited his people.

The famine that has caused them to run away from the land one presumes has broken and there's abundant food back in Israel. And that brings us to the second section. Verses 8 through to 18.

[11 : 55] And what happens is Naomi prepares to go home. She urges each of her daughters, look, there's nothing for you with me. Stay in Moab. And at first they refuse but Naomi presses them to make sure they really know what's going on.

She doesn't want them to share her sad situation. If they come with her they will be poor. They'll be childless widows in a foreign land. There'll be no prospect of marriage for them and eventually Aupar sees sense, listens and reasons and caves in.

She chooses to stay and she demonstrates her choice by kissing Naomi in farewell. but not Ruth. At the end of verse 14 we're told that Ruth clings to Naomi.

She grabs her and she clings to her. And the word used here is the same word used for a husband cleaving to his wife in Genesis 2 verse 24.

She hangs on to him or on to her. And no matter how closely Ruth clings to Naomi, Naomi's not going to let up with this, you see, she urges Ruth to follow Aupar's lead.

[13 : 06] Go with Aupar. It's the smart thing to do. But Ruth refuses. And her words of refusal are some of the most exquisite declarations of devotion in all of Scripture.

People rightly remember them. People can rightly quote them. Verses 16 and 17. She says to Naomi, Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you.

Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people.

Your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. There I will be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me and more as well if even death parts me from you.

In the face of such a declaration, what are you going to do? Naomi caves in. She can see Ruth's determination and she accepts it. She stops trying to dissuade her.

[14:10] This brings us to the third section of the story, verses 19 to 22. The two women arrive in Bethlehem. The village is excited. The women wonder at Naomi and they say, could this be Naomi?

Perhaps age and bitterness, I wonder, has begun to mark her face and Ruth's speech was marked by warmth and devotion but look at Naomi's. Naomi's speech is not warmth and devotion, it is bitterness.

Look at verses 20 and 21. Call me no longer Naomi. Call me Mara. For the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.

I went away full. But the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?

The two references to Yahweh, sandwiched between the two references to the Almighty, make everything very crystal clear. It is God who has mistreated her.

[15:17] In her view, she is distraught, she is empty, she is bitter and then in verse 22 we move on to the next stage of the drama and the chapter is summarised and chapter 2 is looked forward to they arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Friends, there's this chapter and outline. Now, what I'd like to do is tie things together by pointing out some things that maybe you wouldn't see but they are there for you to see. First, I want to point out to you the multiple references to returning that are scattered through the chapter.

Now, most of our English translations don't do us a favour at this point because they don't show us the references as well as they might. However, the word occurs a number of times. Let me show them to you.

Look at verse 6. Naomi decides to return from Moab. In verse 7, the three women begin a return to Judah. In verse 8, Naomi urges the women to return to Moab.

In verse 10, the daughters-in-law assure Naomi that they will return to Judah. In verses 11 and 12, Naomi urges them to return. In verse 15, Naomi notes that Orpah has returned and urges Ruth to do likewise.

[16:28] In verse 16, Ruth tells Naomi to stop urging her to return. In verse 21, Naomi says that it was the Lord who caused her to return. Empty. And in verse 22, we're told that both of them returned from the land of Moab.

The Hebrew word, let me tell you, for return, is the very same word that is used in the Bible for returning to Yahweh. That is, returning in repentance.

Turning to God. And I think that is exactly what the writer wants us to hear. This is the center of this chapter. For bang, in the middle, we see this foreigner doing what?

Returning. Repenting. Coming to God. And the multiple references to turning or returning just serve to highlight this. Here is a woman converting.

A woman becoming God's person. A woman siding with God's people. A woman returning to the God who made her. second, I want you to notice the emphasis on names on this chapter.

[17:34] Did you hear them all as we read through? There are some technical names there, but all the important people are named. And their names seem to mean something when you dig a bit deeper. For example, Naomi's name, well it means pleasant.

And what Naomi says about her name is it's a lie. She says, I don't feel like my name matches my feelings. My feelings are not that of pleasantness, but of bitterness.

I'd rather have that name actually. If you're going to give me a name, give me the name bitter.

That's how I feel. I'd like the name to match me. Marlon and Chilion have names that could be translated weak and sickly.

Oh, very nice, are they? And I wonder whether maybe those names were given to them because they were born in famine. In any case, they live up to their names, don't they? They are weak and sickly and die.

Orpah means the nape of the neck. And she too lives up to her name, you see, for she turns her back or her neck on Naomi and returns to Moab.

[18:43] You'll see later that there's also a play on the name Bethlehem. However, the name I want to concentrate on is this name that I mentioned earlier on, the name of the Lord, Yahweh. Do

you remember what I said back at the beginning?

I told you that the name Chesed and the name Yahweh are often linked. In fact, in many ways, Chesed is the word used to describe the character of God in the Old Testament.

Well, let's have a look at the references to Yahweh in this chapter. In verse 6, Yahweh visits his people and gives them food. In verse 8, Naomi prays that Yahweh will deal gently, kindly with her daughters-in-law justice, they have dealt kindly with her.

In verse 9, she prays that Yahweh might grant them rest. In verse 13, she says, the hand of Yahweh has turned against me. In verse 17, Ruth uses the name of Yahweh as a curse against herself should she break the vow to Naomi.

And finally, in verse 21, Naomi says that the Lord has caused her to return empty. The Lord has witnessed against her. And I want to show you the one reference to Chesed in this chapter.

[19 : 56] Have a look at verse 8. Let me read it to you. Let me substitute the word, the Hebrew word. Verse 8, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go back each one of you to your mother's house, and may the Lord deal Chesed to you, with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

Now, friends, I wonder if you can hear what's being said in this chapter. Can you hear Naomi's bitterness? Can you hear her cry of anguish? Naomi says, Naomi can ask Yahweh to deal Chesed to others.

Can you hear her there in chapter 8? She says, deal, deal, deal Chesed to those. But do you know what she says? She's saying, you've not lived up to your name with me. I have not experienced that from your hand.

The only Chesed I find, the only Chesed I can find in my life, is that that I have received from the hand of foreign women. It's a tragic statement, friends.

If you understand what she is saying, this is incredibly stark. Her prayer for these women is a prayer for herself. You see, this is what she longs for.

[21 : 20] She longs for God to be like this woman that she has met. This woman that has said, I'll go with you, I'll be with you, your God will be my God.

She longs to see this from God. She longs for God to be with her and for her. And that's how the chapter ends.

We know, we know, friends, that God is the God of Chesed. We know that he has come to the aid of his people. Will he come to the aid of this poor, impoverished, destitute, bitter woman?

Will he be? That's the question of this chapter, friends. You need to try and get it into your brains.

Will he be Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful, and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in chesed and faithfulness.

Now, friends, I must admit, when I wrote this sermon the first time, I struggled with how to finish it. I still struggle with how to finish it. After all, this is a wonderful book, and we've seen this wonderful conversion of this beautiful young woman.

[22 : 40] And the truth is that the last voice of this chapter is not her voice. The last voice of this chapter is that of Naomi, and it is full of doubt, full of emptiness, full of accusation, and full of bitterness.

But you know, as I reflected on it, how I might finish this chapter, I thought, well, it wasn't such a bad place to end after all. people. Why? You see, Naomi has experienced what Hebrew people knew and understood and weren't afraid to admit, the ambiguity of faith in God.

See, on the one hand, she knows that he is the source of all good things. She knows that. She's an Israelite. She knows it to be true.

She knows he's the source of all good. She clearly knows that he's sovereign and all powerful. He has controlled her existence, shaped what has happened to her.

She knows it. But on the other side, she knows it's his nature to show chesed. She knows that the best you can pray for as a person is that he will do that for you.

[23 : 52] But the reality is that life is not like that for her at the moment. God seems distant. And the only chesed that she is experiencing comes from a foreigner, an outsider, someone that Israelites were trained to think was just someone who knew nothing about God.

And in the face of this, what does she do? She can simply lament and express her grief to her fellow believers and say, this is what I'm experiencing, friends.

She can tell God how she feels. And then she can wait. And perhaps wait. And perhaps wait for him to be what she knows he is and what he wishes to be.

See, this God can't be pushed. He cannot be bullied. Friends, we have in Christ a greater revelation than the Old Testament. We who are in Christ have seen God's chesed on the cross.

We have seen God's unexpected, surprising, overwhelming, spontaneous kindness and love in the undeserved death of Jesus on our behalf. But some of us who have experienced that love of Jesus, and I know there are some in this congregation who are like this, are still faced with ambiguities.

[25 : 18] And our post-enlightenment minds don't like it. But I want to show you that Naomi's pre-enlightenment mind didn't like it either. Some of us experience things that seem that God's hand is against us.

Well, friends, if this is you, then I think there are two things you can learn from this chapter in Scripture. Two very important things. First, learn from Naomi. Express your grief.

Express it to God. And express it among the people of God. Friends, we Christians do not do it nearly as much as we should. The New Testament urges us to do it.

It says, it presumes that people are weeping. It says, weep with those who weep. Friends, when God is ambiguous, that is when there's ambiguity in his actions, declare it.

Tell him. Tell us. Tell us. Express it. Cry. Yell. Tell God.

[26 : 26] Second, so learn from Naomi. Second, learn from Ruth. You see, Ruth sees Naomi's grief. She sees her bitterness. She sees her honest reflections upon God.

God. But she still knew, didn't she? What? She knew that in this world, life was to be found with this God who had even dealt bitterness.

Or at least Naomi had experienced bitterness from her. But she knew that there was only one place to be and it was with this God that was Naomi's God. And she was going to be, that God was going to be her God.

She knew that life was found with this God and despite ambiguity, she lined up with this God and she chose life with this God and his people above all the alternatives that she knew of.

Friends, to whom else can we go? There may be temporary ambiguities. But we know they will be sorted out. After all, because of the Lord Jesus Christ, we know that God is for us.

[27 : 33] And we can trust him. So let's trust him. And if we have to, let's wait until his son returns from heaven and sets things all right.

Even if he doesn't do it in this life, he will do it, friends. He has staked his reputation on it. He is the God who is the gracious and compassionate God abounding in Chesed.

Now, friends, these words, let me tell you, they sound trite, they're easy to say, but if you're caught in the midst of awful things, I want to tell you that it is all you have to cling to because it is only him who can set them right.

Ruth knew it. She knew there was nowhere else to go. But friends, there will be ambiguity. I cannot promise you anything but, you know, well, I can, I can promise you that it will be set right.

I can't tell you when, but it will be set right. For he is the Lord, he is Yahweh, Yahweh, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in Chesed.

[28 : 46] and the cross tells us, yes, he is this. Let's pray. Father, we we pray that you would help us to be honest with you.

And Father, when we see our friends, our Christian friends in particular, being honest with you, help us to weep with those who weep. Help us, Father, to side with them.

Father, we pray for those in our congregation who do weep. Father, we pray that you would help them to cling to you as Ruth knew in the end. that you were the God who was for his people.

And we know because of the cross that you are for your people. Father, please help us if we are caught in the ambiguity of life and of faith. Please help us to cling to this reality.

And Father, we remember those words from Romans chapter eight. We know that nothing can separate us from you. Father, we pray that you'd help us with this.

[30 : 07] For you caused this book about Ruth and Naomi to be inspired so that we might look at it and put out and notice Naomi and notice Ruth and learn from them.

We thank you for them and their example. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen.