

# God's Kindness?

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[ 0 : 00 ] I will please take a seat. It'd be great if you had a Bible, you could open to Ruth chapter 1.

We're starting a new series through the book of Ruth. It'd be helpful for you to be able to follow along in a Bible. There's also an outline in the bulletins that you might find helpful as well. Well, I thought I'd start this morning with a couple of opening soundtracks to different movies. I'm going to play them for you and I want to see if you can guess which movie they are from.

So here we go, this is from the phone, so let's see how this one works. Anyone?

Star Wars, yes, a triumphant opening to the movie Star Wars. All right, here's a different opening soundtrack from a different movie. It is playing.

[ 1 : 08 ] It is playing. Listen carefully. It is. It is.

It's the Jaws. Anyway, you get the idea, don't you? Yeah. Now, each of those opening soundtracks sounds a different note, doesn't it?

The Star Wars one is triumphant, whereas the Jaws one is rather ominous. It's a note of danger. As we begin our look at the story of Ruth, the first sentence in chapter 1 is like the opening soundtrack to Ruth, as it were.

It sounds a note. But is it more like Star Wars or is it more like Jaws? Well, let's see. Have a look there in your Bibles at the first sentence. It says, In the days when the judges ruled, there was famine in the land.

It doesn't sound all that great to start with. But it's actually, I think, worse than we first suspect. Because with the mention of Judges, if you know anything about the story of Judges, it wasn't a great time in Israel's history.

[ 2 : 17 ] See, in the book of Judges, which happens right before Ruth, we see a cycle, which is on the first slide there. I'm hoping that comes up. There it is. What happened was the people would sin and reject God.

And so God would send an invading country in or famine or something like that to turn the people back to him. And they would turn. They would repent. They would turn back to him.

And so God would raise up a judge who would then rescue the people or he'd send food in the land or something like that. And this cycle goes on and on and on throughout the book of Judges.

In fact, it's actually more like a downward spiral because the sin keeps getting worse and worse and worse. And in fact, the last verse of the book of Judges on the opposite side of the page in your Bibles there, you can just leave that slide up there for a moment.

But have a look at the last verse of the book of Judges. It's just on the other side of the page there. Verse 25 says of the book of Judges, Now that verse is more than just a statement of fact that there was no king.

[ 3 : 22 ] It's actually an indictment on Israel. You see, while it is true that Israel had no human king, God was supposed to be their king. Yet instead of obeying God as king, everyone, it says, did as they saw fit.

They lived as though they had no king, not even God. So this verse describes a terrible state of affairs. And these are the days in which the story of Ruth opens.

So the mention of Judges isn't a good start. And then comes in the first sentence of Ruth, also the mention of famine. Do you see that? Famine in Bethlehem, which is ironic given that the word or the town Bethlehem, the name Bethlehem means house of bread.

But there is no bread, just famine. And so which part of this cycle do you think Israel is in at the moment as the story of Ruth opens? It's the judgment for sin part, isn't it?

This sentence sounds a very ominous note, you see, as the story of Ruth opens. But as we know from the cycles in Judges, tough times were meant to move Israel to repent, to turn back to God, as

it says there on the slide.

[ 4 : 30 ] And so that the famine might move them to return back to God. But for one man, as the story of Ruth commences, for one man and his family, he takes a different tact.

Instead of turning back to God, he actually goes away from God. So at point one, verse one. So in those days when the judges ruled, there was famine in the land.

So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech. His wife's name was Naomi.

And the names of his two sons were Marlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

See, Elimelech's idea to deal with the famine is to go away from Israel and to move the family to the country of Moab, a neighboring country. Now, on the surface, this may not have seemed like a bad idea at the time.

[ 5 : 28 ] After all, Moab presumably has food. But the whole point of living in the land of Israel was that this was the promised land that God had given him. This was the place that God had set aside for his people to live.

This was the place where God would be their God and they would be his people. And so to move away from Israel, from the promised land, was in effect to move away from God. See, if things weren't going well, they were supposed to look at themselves and see if they were sinning.

And if so, they were to repent, turn back to God, who was their king, and would save them. He saved them from Egypt. He saved them from every other nation so he could save them from famine. And if they weren't sinning, then they were still to trust God to provide as their king.

Either way, they were to flee to God, not from God. But Elimelech doesn't do this, does he? Instead of turning to God as king and trusting in him, he decides to turn to Moab and trust in them.

And what's worse, Moab was essentially an enemy country of Israel. They didn't have a very pleasant history together. It's interesting also that the narrator begins and ends the book of Ruth with a whole list of names which carry meaning.

[ 6 : 36 ] We've already seen that the name Bethlehem means house of bread. But Elimelech's name means God is king. But does he live up to his name?

No, he doesn't. Instead, he leaves his land and essentially he's God. Now, perhaps we're being a little too harsh on the man. But Elimelech is not actually presented in positive terms here. I mean, just look at the names he gives his two sons in verse 2.

In verse 2, he names his sons Marlon and Kilion. Now, these names were not Jewish or Israelite names. They were Canaanite names. Names that came from a foreign country, an enemy country. And so whether deliberately or not, we already see Elimelech moving away from God, away from his people by giving his sons foreign names. Now, to move away from God is not only sinful but foolish.

I mean, do you know what the names Marlon and Kilion actually mean? They mean sick and failing. That's what they mean. It's kind of like naming your two sons Hepatitis and Swine Flu.

[ 7 : 38 ] It's foolish, isn't it? And this move away from God's land, God's people, and ultimately God himself, well, it may have seemed like a good idea at the time, but it is foolishness. In fact, it's also disastrous, which we'll come to in a moment.

But I want to tell you a story about another man who thought he had a good idea at the time, Larry Walters. Larry always wanted to fly ever since he was a boy. His poor eyesight disqualified him from becoming a pilot in the Air Force.

So one day he thought it would be a good idea to tie 45 weather balloons to his armchair and float around in the sky. There he is. Okay. So 45 weather balloons. He packed some sandwiches and a six-pack of beer and a pellet gun.

Now, the idea was that he'd slowly float up to about 30 feet, enjoy a few hours floating around. Then he'd shoot the balloons with his pellet gun and then just safely land back down. Now, those ropes were tied to his Jeep.

And the moment his friends cut the ropes, the armchair flew up, not 30 feet, not 300 feet, but 1,600 feet. And at that height, he didn't think it was safe to shoot any balloons.

[ 8 : 43 ] So he stayed in the air, frightened for 14 hours until he drifted into the primary approach corridor of LAX airport, where approaching airplane pilots actually radioed in this strange thing.

Eventually, he got the nerve to shoot up some balloons and slowly descended, only to get caught in some power lines and shorted out a whole suburb. He finally made it down where he was then arrested by the LA Police Department.

And the next caption, here he is, Larry Walters, lawn chair pilot. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but it was foolishness, wasn't it?

Elimelech's move away may have seemed like a good idea at the time, but it was foolishness to flee from God rather than to God in trust and obedience, even in difficult times, is in the end foolishness. And for Elimelech's family, it was also disastrous. Have a look there at verse number three in your Bibles. Verse number three. Now, Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died and she was left with her two sons.

[ 9 : 48 ] They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about 10 years, both Marlon and Kilion also died. And Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Unfortunately, the sons actually do live up to their names of sick and failing, don't they? But it's a huge tragedy for Naomi, isn't it? For Naomi, there is a famine at home.

Her husband's a fool and then he dies. And instead of going home, her sons decide to stay and marry these foreign women, these enemies of Israel, when God had said not to marry them because they might lead you astray to worship other gods.

Then the sons die and leave Naomi with no one to provide for her in a foreign country that has not always been friendly to Israel. It's a huge tragedy, especially in those days where there was no benefit payments for widows.

Women in those days were particularly dependent on the men to provide for them. And at the end of verse 5, we literally read, And the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

[ 10 : 53 ] The narrator actually doesn't call her Naomi. The narrator literally calls her the woman. It's as though her suffering is so great that she's lost even her identity. Now, some people at this point think that Naomi's suffering was because of her sin.

Certainly Israel was suffering famine because of their sin. But I take it Naomi is caught up in the suffering that came from her husband's folly and sin. As the head of the family, especially in those days, Elimelech would have made the decisions about taking the family away from God to Moab. And then he dies. Then the sons would have become the head of the family. But they made the decision to stay and intermarry when God had said not to do so. And then they die. It seems Naomi suffers disaster because of the sin of the men in her life.

And much like we suffer a disaster in this world because of the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden. In fact, the first decision that Naomi makes on her own is actually a good one. For she decides to return home.

Which brings us to point 2 and verse 6. And as I read these verses here, I'm going to read quite a big chunk now. And listen to what word keeps popping up. No translation always translates this word every time.

[ 12 : 00 ] So I'm going to read it a little bit literally. And listen out for what word comes up. So from verse 6. When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

When her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road to return to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, return each of you to your mother's home.

May the Lord show kindness to you as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. Then she kissed them and wept aloud.

And they said to her, we'll return with you to your people. But Naomi said, return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons who would become your husbands?

Return home, my daughters. I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me. Even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons, would you wait around until they grew up?

[ 13 : 02 ] Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters, it is more bitter for me than for you. Because the Lord's hand has gone out against me. At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

Look, said Naomi, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and her gods. Return with her. And so it goes. Notice what word keeps popping up? Return, isn't it?

Naomi is returning home and she's telling Orpah and Ruth to return to their home. But they are saying they will return to her home. The theme of returning is quite strong in this first chapter. In fact, the word return occurs 12 times in 22 verses.

That's just a bit more over once every second verse. You see, when you wander away from God or are led astray from God, as in Naomi's case, then the wise move is always to return back to God. As we heard from James last week, the prayer for forgiveness is always powerful and effective. And it seems God has brought forgiveness to the Israelites. For Naomi hears there is food.

[14:02] And so instead of staying in Moab, where presumably still is food there as well, she decides to return home. Back to her people. Back to the promised land. And back to God's rule.

Which Elimelech had taken them all away from. Notice in verses 8 to 9 that Naomi has never lost her belief in God, by the way. She still believes in God. But she's not living under his rule with his people in his place.

And so Naomi returns back to God's place, God's people and God's rule. But notice that as she does return, she returns with bitterness. She says in verses 11 to 13 that there is no hope for her. See verse 12, Return home, my daughters. I am too old to have another husband. And even if I thought there was still hope for me, even if I had a husband tonight, then gave birth, would you still wait around until they grew up? No, return home.

For it is more bitter for me than for you. Because the Lord's hand has turned against me. In other words, I have lost more than you have lost.

[15:08] And at least you still have the hope of finding another husband, whereas I don't even have that hope. All I am is bitter, for the Lord's hand is against me. See, while she rightly acknowledges that God is in control, she blames him, it seems, for her husband's folly.

And can only see suffering from God's hand. She's blinded by bitterness. In fact, if you just turn over the page for a moment to verse number 19, we see it there as well.

So verse number 19, just over the page, it says, So the two women, that's Naomi and Ruth, verse 19, went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them.

And the women exclaimed, Can this be Naomi? Don't call me Naomi, which means pleasant or sweet, she told them. Call me Mara, which means bitter.

Because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.

[16:14] You see, Naomi wants to change her name from pleasant and sweet to bitter. Because that's how she sees her life now. God's hand is only against her.

That's all he has brought her, is suffering and bitterness. And it's easy to feel that sometimes when we suffer, isn't it? You see, while it is right to mourn with those who mourn and cry out to God, even ask why, you know, God is letting this happen, we can sometimes overstep the mark and complain about God in bitterness, as Naomi seems to be doing here.

We can overstep the mark sometimes and even accuse God of not knowing what he is doing, as Job did in the book of Job. And in both cases, we become bitter towards God.

We're blinded by our bitterness. I remember one time, not long after university, I heard about a 19-year-old guy who became a Christian through the Christian group at the uni. And it wasn't long before this guy was telling other people about Jesus.

They were becoming Christians. He was a gifted evangelist. He could go up to people and say, mate, if you don't want to go to hell, then you need to believe in Jesus. And instead of people being offended, they say, yeah, okay, all right, tell me more.

[17:24] It wasn't exactly like that, but people were literally becoming Christians left, right, and center. He's a great blessing to the kingdom. And then a few months later, he drowned while swimming at the beach.

And I remember talking to one of the Christian workers at the university, and why would God let this happen? He's this great guy for the kingdom, telling people about Jesus, people becoming Christians, and then God lets him drown just a few months later.

I couldn't work it out. And my crying out to God, why, quickly turned to accusing God of saying, you really sure you know what you're doing, God? This is crazy. And I became bitter towards him. You see, when tragedy strikes, it's right to cry out to God. It's right to mourn with those who mourn. But we can quickly overstep the mark and accuse God of incompetence, like Job did at one point. And we can quickly overstep the mark and become bitter, as Naomi does. And in the end, she completely misses God's kindness to her in Ruth. See, look at the verses we skipped over before. [18:27] So go back to verse 16, which we skipped. Down the bottom of the page, right-hand side there, verse number 16. But Ruth replied to Naomi, Naomi, don't urge me to leave you or to return from you.

Where you go, I will go. And when you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. Now, Ruth's loyalty here is amazing, isn't it? It's almost like wedding vows. For better, for worse, I will not leave you till death do us part. Ruth is not going, sorry, Ruth is going to a foreign country and she has no idea where she will live, what she will eat or how she will survive. At face value, she's much better off going back to her own country in Moab. But Ruth doesn't act on face value. Despite the situation, she commits herself not only to Naomi, but to Naomi's God as well.

[19:34] And her commitment and loyalty stand in stark contrast to Naomi's bitterness. I mean, even the way these events are arranged highlights Ruth as a model for right behaviour.

You see, you've got the two scenes where Naomi is bitter. It's more bitter for me than for you, she says to the daughters, and then she returns home and says, I want to be called Mara because God has made me my life bitter.

And then in between, sandwich in between, as if to highlight it, is the scene with Ruth and her amazing loyalty. Ruth is a model, a model for us to follow that no matter what the situation, we're to trust God.

Ruth doesn't know how she'll survive. She's going to a foreign land, yet she's committed to Naomi and to her God. But Ruth is not only a model and contrast to Naomi's bitterness, Ruth is also God's kindness to Naomi.

In fact, in verse 8, Ruth is said to have the same kindness as God. The word for kindness there in verse 8 is the word *hesed*, which describes God's abounding, loving kindness, extravagant kindness.

[20:44] It's one of Andrew Reid's favourite words, I've learnt this one from him. It's the word that is used when God proclaims his character and glory to Moses. I think this might be on the slide, a verse from Exodus.

God proclaims and he passed in front of Moses proclaiming the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in *hesed* and faithfulness.

God's kindness or *hesed* speaks of his abounding, loving kindness. And it's this loving kindness that Ruth has already shown to her dead husband and Naomi back in verse 8.

And he's now again showing to Naomi. This is the type of person God is giving to Naomi. And in case we don't see how great God's kindness is to Naomi in giving Ruth to her, listen to the way that Ruth is described at the end of the book.

In chapter 4, verse 15, the women comment to Naomi saying that, Ruth, your daughter-in-law who loves you is better to you than seven sons, it says.

[21:48] that is, sons are highly prized in those days and the women exclaimed to Naomi that Ruth is better than seven of them.

You see, even in Naomi's suffering, God shows her kindness for he gives her Ruth who displays God's very character of loving kindness and is worth more than seven sons.

But Naomi is blinded by her bitterness and doesn't see it. If you come back to chapter 1, verse 21, remember what she says? At verse 21, I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty.

Now who is standing next to her when she says she has nothing, when she says she's empty?

Ruth. I wonder how Ruth would have felt at that point when Naomi says she has nothing.

See, Naomi's bitterness has blinded her to God's kindness. What's more, look at verse 22. Notice what the narrator says. He says, So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite,

her daughter-law, returning in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

[ 22 : 57 ] You see, not only does Naomi return back with Ruth who is better than seven sons, she returns home coincidentally right as the harvest time was beginning, right when there would be plenty of food in Bethlehem, the house of bread.

If the first sentence of this chapter ought to start with that ominous opening music of Jaws, then this last one ought to end with the triumphant music of Star Wars. For in God's kindness he has and will provide for Naomi even in suffering.

Indeed, that's what the whole story of Ruth is about, God providing for his people and even us, even through Naomi's suffering and her return home with Ruth because through her suffering and her return home with Ruth will come Jesus, you see.

Remember I said that the book of Ruth begins and ends with a whole list of names? Well, in the last chapter of chapter 4 it ends with that list of names. You see, from Ruth comes Obed, from Obed comes Jesse and from Jesse comes King David and from King David ultimately comes King Jesus, you see.

Through Jesus God will provide forgiveness even for Naomi and for us all who believe in him so that we can return home to God. You see, God works for our good even through suffering.

[ 24 : 16 ] Well, final point, point three, what lessons are there for us in this chapter? Three quick ones. Firstly, which is actually the middle one on the outline, sorry about that, but firstly, if you have wandered away from God, if God is not really part of your life or you are far from God, then return home.

Return to him. That's the wise move. Return home and trust in Jesus through whose death God will forgive you. Come home to Christ and God will forgive you.

And if you are here today because life has been hard, then who knows? Perhaps, just perhaps, God is using this time of suffering to turn you back to him.

I know this is the case for one person at our church today. And as you return to God, as you trust in Jesus, you can be assured of forgiveness and life eternal. It doesn't mean you'll never suffer again in life, but it does mean that God will be with you through it and bring you home to heaven where there will be no more pain, no more suffering or death.

If you have gone away from God, the first lesson is to come home, return. The second one for us who have already returned back to God then is that when tough times hit, we're to make sure that we don't flee from God, but to God, trusting him.

[ 25 : 36 ] Whether we are suffering because of our sin, as was the case for Israel during the time of the judges, or whether our suffering is because of Adam's sin, that is because we live in a fallen world, which is usually what it is for us. Either way, when suffering comes, we are never to flee from God, but to God, trusting in him.

You see, he knows what it's like to suffer. He gave his only son for us. He knows suffering. And yet, he continues to work for our good, just as he was working through Naomi and Ruth for our good to bring Jesus.

As we heard from our first reading from Romans chapter 8, we know that in all things, even in suffering, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

You see, God has worked for our good in the past in sending Jesus. And so we can trust him that he will continue to work for our good in the present, even through suffering. We are to flee, not from God, but to God.

And third, when tough times hit, we are to be careful that bitterness does not blind us to God's kindness. You see, as Paul continues to write in Romans 8, he says, if God is for us, who can be against us?

[ 26 : 42 ] He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things, all things we need to make it to heaven? And he continues that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, not even suffering.

You see, even in suffering, we can still know God's loving kindness to us in Jesus. For God has not only given us his son and made us his sons in return, with all the privileges that go with that, but he will also graciously give us all things we need to make it home to heaven.

We're not to miss God's kindness to us, even in suffering. Last Monday, Michelle, my wife, met up with a friend in the city, whom we'll call Cindy. Cindy was down from Sydney, actually, visiting her

father in hospital.

Her father was in hospital because he had a pretty serious bleed on the brain and needed emergency surgery. To make things worse, he's also suffering from cancer.

And so he was operated on last Monday and is doing better now, but before the operation, before things got better, Cindy was speaking to her mum, who is not a Christian, and she was very bitter about the situation.

[ 27 : 52 ] Can't believe this is happening. It's ridiculous. How bad is this life kind of thing? Yet she also spoke to her father before the operation, and her father became a Christian about three years ago.

And so even though he's about to go into emergency surgery, which means he may not make it out, even though with a bleeding brain and cancer, he said to his daughter, Cindy, I've just got so much to be thankful for, so much to be thankful for, to God.

He's given me so much. That's what he said. How can you say that? What's he given you? Cancer, a brain bleed, emergency surgery? How can you say that? Well, you see, instead of letting bitterness blind him, he knew that nothing could separate him from God's loving kindness.

That God is at work even through this situation to bring good, just like he was at work through Naomi's situation to bring good. And he also still saw with fresh eyes how much God's loving kindness had provided for him in this life.

Yeah, forgiveness, meaning, joy, the position of being God's treasured children, and that God would provide even more for him in the life to come.

[ 29 : 06 ] You see, he was not blinded by his bitterness. He still recognized God's kindness to him, even in suffering. Let me finish. Living in a fallen world, this side of heaven means tough times will come our way, guaranteed.

But when they do, we're not to flee from God, nor let bitterness blind us to his kindness. Instead, we're to remember that God has worked for our good in the past, and so that we can trust him, that he will work for our good in the present, even in suffering, that we might be more like Jesus, and that he might bring us home safely in the future to be with him forever.

So, trust him. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this story of Ruth, for the example, that she was to Naomi and is to us, for the way that you worked through her kindness to show kindness to us all by sending your son Jesus to die for us.

Father, we ask that in times of difficulty and suffering, that you would help us not to flee from you, but to you, trusting in you, not to be blinded by bitterness, but to keep seeing your loving kindness towards us in Christ.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.