

Emptiness

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Preacher: Paul Dudley

[0:00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 3rd of March 2002. The preacher is Paul Dudley.

His sermon is entitled Emptiness and is based on Ruth Chapter 1. I have a confession to make.

I like romantic comedies. You've got mail. Yeah, I like that. Sleepless in Seattle. Yeah, I like that as well.

In fact, I'm going to make another confession. I actually had little tears in the corner of my eye at the end of it. Yes, I'm sorry.

I'm one of those guys that just loves the happy ending. Those romantic comedies. You know those ones where they just can't get together. You just don't think they're going to get together.

[1:03] And then right at the end they do. And you just... It's just so good. You get the tissue out and you... But you've got to be very careful. You see, my wife's sitting beside me and she's just got to make sure that you do it very carefully.

You know? The book of Ruth is a romantic comedy. And it's going to be a great book to study. I'm really looking forward to studying this with you over the next three weeks.

It's romantic in that we have courtship and marriage in it. And it's a comedy in that it has a happy ending. But above all, it's a great story.

A great story. It's a gentle story with charm and simplicity in it. It has great movement. It moves from death to life.

From barrenness to fruitfulness. From emptiness to fullness. From curse to blessing.

[2:06] It has quite a few entertaining moments as well. Like the discreet but unmistakable courtship of the male. Trying to woo her woman.

The feminine scheming to force his hand. The females in the background there. Just trying to work. Making sure they can get their man.

The embarrassment of finding a woman lying at your feet. And the shrewd handling. So the two can actually get together in marriage. The best thing about this book is.

It's got a happy ending. It's got a great ending. It's one of those books where you might need the tissues for at the end. Just to wipe the tear away at the end.

Because it's a very moving book. But don't be deceived. It's actually quite deceptive as a book. While things may be fairly gentle on top.

[3:06] Beneath there's a few rumblings. There's a few things that are quite difficult. Did you know it's one of the most neglected books in the Christian Bible. How does this book in the Old Testament apply to us?

How do we deal with some of the abrasive and some of the sharp edges that we find in this book? How do we deal with these little embarrassing moments?

How do we deal with them? How do we deal with them? How do we deal with them? It's not quite as old as it seems. Well we're going to be looking at this book in three weeks. There are four episodes.

This week we're going to look at the first episode. Next week we're going to look at the next two episodes. And then finally we'll look at the final part of this book. So let's begin by looking at chapter one. You might want to have that open before you as we move through it.

The scene opens like a great play. The stage is dark. And the narrator's voice comes over the microphone.

[4 : 06] He's trying to set the scene for us. He gives it in very stark and very clear terms. Not too much emotion. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.

And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab. He and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech.

And the name of his wife Naomi. And the names of his son were Malon and Chilion. They were Mephorites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died. And was left with two sons. These took Moabite wives.

The name of one was Ophah. And the name of the other Ruth. When they lived there about ten years, both Malon and Chilion also died. So the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

[5 : 09] A bleak picture is painted by the narrator at the beginning. But in that bleak picture that is painted in the first five verses, the seed of the story is planted for the rest of the book.

It's there. First of all, he establishes a time frame. He gives us some context of this story of Ruth. He tells us it was in the time of the judges.

Now if you look back in the book of Judges, this is a very dark period of Israel's history. It is a time between Joshua's death and Saul, King Saul, when he comes onto the throne.

There is tremendous religious and social chaos. There is violent intrusions. There is apostate religion. Unchecked lawlessness.

Tribal civil war. And above all, Israel is lacking godly leadership. Someone at the helm. There is just this complete and utter vacuum in Israel's leadership.

[6 : 12] That's the background that has in mind as we read this story. It's in this context that we have this lovely story of Ruth. Well, the narrator in this part here gives us two problems.

The first problem we see is that there is a famine in the land. So Elimelech and his family head to Moab, the country of Moab.

That's the first problem we see that is set up in this story. There's a famine. So off they go. But we find the solution to that famine fairly early on in verse 6 of this chapter.

We can solve that problem fairly quickly. But there is a bigger and far greater problem in the book of Ruth. And that is the destitution of Naomi.

She is without a husband. She is without sons in a foreign country. You can just picture it, can't you?

[7 : 17] The lights come down on the stage. And there you have Naomi standing there. A widow. A foreign country. She looks terrible.

She has no protection, no way of provision or protection from her husband. She lives in a male dominant culture. She is empty.

Notice at the end of it that the woman, she is called the woman. She is even without a name at the end. She is empty, utterly empty in this country.

This is highlighted, I guess by also just the amount of names that are in this first section. We have the names of all the people in the family and the countries and all this. It is full of names in this first section.

But they are all lost. Highlighting her emptiness. You can just see the picture, can't you?

[8 : 23] There she is on stage. That little narrow light comes shining down on the stage. The narrator's voice is heard again. Let's read verse 6.

She picks up her bags, the belongings that she has on the floor, throws them over her shoulder and starts heading back home.

There is a little ray of hope. She is going to go back to her country. She is going to get some food, perhaps there. Why? Because God has considered his people.

God has remembered that he is bound to his people Israel and has ended the famine. Well, off they go.

And they start walking along the stage. You can just see it there. All their bags on their shoulder. It's kind of a sad picture. A very sad picture of emptiness, of loneliness, of uncertainty.

[9 : 33] What will happen when they get back there? And in verse 7, we see. So they set out from the place where they had been living.

She and her two daughters-in-law. And they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law. And here the narration starts.

You can see her turning to her two daughters-in-law and saying, Go back. Go back. There is no point coming with me. I have nothing to offer you.

Turn back and go to your country. Back to your country. The Moabites. She pleads with them. She asks that God will bless them.

Because that's all she's got left. That she may call a blessing on her two daughters-in-law. That's all she's got left. And in the same process, she cuts off all their obligations to her.

[10 : 37] It's like a formal goodbye. It's like saying, look, you don't have to look after me anymore. Go back. There is nothing for you to stay with me. Go back to your mother's house.

It says there in verse 8. Go back, each of you, to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as he has dealt with the dead and with me. Go back to your mother's house.

Here is just a way of saying, go back to where you may be able to find another husband. For it was in the bedroom, in the mother's house, in the place of the bedroom, is where marriages were arranged.

So she's saying, look, go back. Go find another husband. Back in your own country. There's no point in coming with me. The Lord grant you.

The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you, in the house of your husband. Then she kissed them, and they wept loudly. Such is the bonds that they had, that they started weeping uncontrollably.

[11 : 44] You can just see, can't you, in the picture there, on the stage. All three of them hugging there and crying, and just the great sadness of the possible departure. But they say no.

They said to her, no, we will return with you to your people. And then Naomi pushes the point again, that she has nothing to give.

Naomi said, turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have 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. For I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there were hope for me. Even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons.

Would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters. It has been far more bitter for me than for you.

[12:45] Because the hand of the Lord has turned against me. She pushes the point. She has nothing to offer these women. These daughters-in-law. She has nothing.

She cannot give them other sons. She is too old for that. And then she says, hypothetically, even if I did have a husband. And I was able to bear children.

What's the possibility of there going to be sons anyhow? But even if they are sons. Will you wait that long? Will you wait that long? It's a hypothetical.

It's a slim chance. And then she brings, hammers the point home right at the end. And she points out the fact that God's hand has been against her all this time. And you want to go back into this uncertainty?

If God's hand has been against me up until now, what will happen when we get back to my own land? What if it continues there? She pushes the point. Go back.

[13:45] Go back to your own land. Find husbands for yourselves there. Well, again we see in verse 14. Then they wept aloud again.

Great tears of sadness. And you can see the camera coming a little closer. The spotlight drawing in on the three of them there. And the author, she comes up to Naomi and kisses her goodbye.

And we see her head back towards the Moabite, to Moab, to go find her husband. But Ruth clings to her.

The understandable thing is what Orpha has done. She is headed off. That's a sensible thing to do.

But Ruth, there she is. Unexpected. She clings to Naomi. Unexpected. Unexpected. Unexpected. Unexpected. Extraordinary. Extraordinary. She clings to Naomi. Naomi tries one more time.

[14:50] She tries with peer pressure to send Ruth back. So she said, see your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods.

Return after your sister-in-law. She uses peer pressure. Look, your sister-in-law has gone. You go too. Look at the roots that you've got back there.

Your own religion. Your own people. Possibly family. Go back with them. And then at this dramatic point, it's almost like a high point.

We have these fantastic words by Ruth. It's like this dramatic climax. Ruth says, 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 shall be my people. Your God, my God.

[15:52] Where you die, I will die. There will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me and more as well. Even if death parts me from you.

Look at the commitment that Ruth has to Naomi. She links herself intimately with Naomi. Both in geography.

She'll go wherever Ruth goes. Both in theology. Whatever God she has, she will follow that God. In time, she goes beyond the time of Naomi. Because she's probably fairly old.

She will be buried there. She links herself intimately with Naomi. Such extravagance. Such kindness. Such a great change in life for Ruth.

She casts her lot with Yahweh. With Naomi's God. I guess it's one of the closest things we see in the Old Testament to a conversion.

[16:58] Of someone following on Yahweh. And then in verse 18. We have this, like a bit of a pause.

We've had this great symphony. This great words of commitment. Of kindness and love. And then we have these words in verse 18. When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her.

She said no more. There's pause on the stage. Time to reflect on the words. Time to take a breath.

Naomi says no more. She accepts the fact that Ruth is going with her. But it's time for the audience to reflect a little as well.

For perhaps wriggle in the seat a little bit. For those in the audience who know. It actually is not right that a Moabite should go into the assembly of the Lord.

[17:57] In Deuteronomy 25, this is picked up. No, sorry. Deuteronomy 23. It's picked up there. That you are not to bring a Moabite into the assembly of God.

Well. This is a problem for us. How is it that Naomi is able to come into God's people? Is this a contradiction in law?

There's a bit of tension here. As I spoke about in the beginning. Here's one of those little sharp points. How do we deal with this? Well it's not my aim to actually look at that tonight. To work out how we deal with this.

How a Moabite actually comes into the assembly of the Lord. How a Moabite comes into God's people. We'll look at that for another night. But the fact is, here is a Moabite woman coming into the family of Israel.

Now. When we come to the final scene. The women walk into town. So the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem.

[19:09] Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem. The whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said. Is this Naomi? You can see it in the stage can't you? There they are walking.

The two of them. Obviously very sad. Very uncertain. And they come walking into the town. And there are people scattered on the stage. Some other women. And they start pointing. Is that Naomi?

They start looking at her. I think it is. I think it is Naomi. Yeah. But she looks terrible. What's happened to her? And you can see Naomi just listening.

Looking around. Hearing these words. And in the end she's had enough of it. And she speaks out. Here we see a woman.

Who is empty. Here we see. Her calling out. And saying. Look. No longer call me Naomi.

[20:29] Naomi means in Hebrew. Lovely. And pleasant. Don't call me that anymore. Call me Mara. Meaning bitter.

Why? Because the Lord's hand has been against me. The Lord has dealt bitterly with me. He has brought me back empty. I was full. But now I am empty.

Well it's a very sad picture. Right at the end we hear the narrator's voice. Come over the sound system.

To give the summary of the events. In verse 22. So Naomi returned with Ruth the Moabite. Her daughter-in-law. Who came back from her country of Moab.

They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. The lights are starting to dim down on the stage. For the first scene. The narrator's voice has just told us.

[21:37] The summary of the events. She's come back. But she's come back. With a bit of ray of hope. For she's come back. With Ruth. And she's come back.

With a barley harvest. You can just see the little spots. The two final spots. Lasting. Just lingering on Ruth. And the barley harvest in the background. Perhaps there is some hope in this story.

Well what are we to learn from this chapter? It's a very moving chapter.

A chapter that starts with fullness. And ends up with emptiness. Of great sadness. Of a widow.

Coming back to her own country. Well there's something I want you to notice. In the midst of this story. In chapter one. You probably won't actually notice it.

[22:36] It's actually an unseen character. That is there. For in chapter one. There is this unseen character. Moving around the stage. That you don't see. I don't know if you've ever been to a play. But they're normally dressed in black.

And they're moving things around. They're changing the set. They're making things. So they're just right. That character is actually God. In the midst of chapter one.

God is there. And he has his hand. On the whole situation. We can just catch glimpses. Of God every now and then. Just like you catch glimpses. Of this darkly clothed person.

Running around the stage. We catch glimpses of God. Here and there. Look in verse six. For she had heard in the country of Moab. That the Lord had considered his people.

And given them food. Here we see God being involved. In human affairs. Providing food for Israel. For Judah. Back there. We see in verses eight and nine.

[23:34] When Naomi says. That God will bring great kindness. Upon the daughters-in-law. Recognizing that it's God. Who brings kindness upon people.

In verse 13. And in verse 20 and 21. We see that Naomi recognizes the fact that destinies are determined by God. He is the one that is moving here.

He is the one that has brought Naomi back. He is the one that has brought the bitterness. The great destitution upon Naomi. Naomi. Well Naomi recognizes this.

That it is from God's hand. That the bitterness. And the hopelessness that she feels that she is in. Has come from God. Do you know this is a very hard lesson for us to learn.

In the midst of our hardship. We want to turn and blame God. We want to turn our backs on God. We want to say. No, no. God can't be involved in this. But from this chapter we see.

[24:37] That God is intimately involved in his world. He is the one that allows these things to happen. He is not the one that causes the evil.

But he allows it to happen. Upon Naomi. Not only does he allow it to happen. But he allows it to happen. For their good. For her good. For him to bring.

For God to bring out his purposes. In Romans 8.28. Romans picks up this. This picture. Romans 8.28 says this.

We know that all things work together for good. For those who love God. And who accord according to his. According to his purpose. God works. For the good.

In hardship. In bitterness. We might not be able to see it. We might not see it in this lifetime. But we are to know that God is there. In the midst of it.

[25:39] That he loves us. That he cares for us. In the midst of all this. God is in the background.

In this whole chapter. We see this. In the way that Naomi returns. Naomi comes back. To her homeland. Now this. This theme of departure and return.

Is. I think thematic. Or. It's a great theme. That is picked up. That. That brings up the theme of rebellion and repentance. Repentance. She goes away in rebellion. And comes back in repentance.

Now it doesn't actually use these words in this chapter. But I think there is enough indicators all the way through this chapter. To be able to see this. Look at the sheer number of times.

That we see the words return. Turn back language. The notion of repentance. Look at the way that she returns. The circumstances of her return.

[26 : 40] She comes back because of the Lord's provision. When she is away from God. She is missing out on God's provision. And then she comes back. Back into the covenant community. There to be provided for by God.

She returns. Back into God's community. To Yahweh. Notice God working here. God is working in her life. To bring her back.

In repentance. I don't know about you. And what struggles you are going through at the moment. It was great hearing about Andrew. And how in the midst of his struggle.

God worked through him. To bring him back to himself. If you know that God is calling to you. And you know you have great need of salvation.

Can I encourage you. To come to God. To repent. And to recognise your great need of him. Well unbeknown to Naomi.

[27 : 44] Not only is there a great blessing bestowed upon her. She comes back into the community of God. But God brings out his purposes. To Israel there. At the beginning we saw that Israel was looking for a leader.

As we see later on. We'll see that. Through Naomi. The great leader King David. Comes along. And through King David. We see God working out his purposes.

For us. In Christ. You see through this. This humble story of a woman. Of a family. God starts working out his purposes. He's there in the background.

Bringing out his purposes. Of great blessing. Naomi doesn't realise it yet. But there is great blessing there. Through this bitterness.

This bitter experience. We also see Ruth. Coming from the nations. Here we see God working out his purposes again. Of drawing in the nations. Of bringing people from every tribe.

[28 : 50] God has a concern for people throughout the world. Can I encourage you to think about that for yourselves. To see here that God is concerned for those who are lost.

And that we can take our part in that. Well the final thing that we see here. With God working in the background. Is the great theme of kindness.

This theme of kindness we're going to be picking up in weeks to come. Because it's the great theme of this book. Kindness. God's kindness to his people. God's kindness to Naomi.

God's kindness to us. God's kindness to us. We see it in verse 6. No sorry. Verse 8.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law. Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you. As he has dealt with the dead and with me. May the Lord deal kindly with you.

[29 : 49] Through the rest of the book we'll see the way that God deals kindly. Very, very kindly. Naomi at the end of the chapter is bitter.

She comes back in repentance. But it's a flawed repentance. She's angry. She's bitter. There's self-pity in her life. We can see evidences of that.

What she doesn't realise is the great kindness that is right beside her. In Ruth. God's provision for Naomi. Naomi. As I said, I enjoy a good romantic comedy.

The problem is, when you get to the end of the romantic comedy, you're not quite sure whether there's going to be a happy forever after story. Whether the ending's just going to be happy from that point on.

Because you only get to see the wedding scene, or you get them seeing riding off in the distance. But the great thing that we can see with the Bible is, is God who is working out his purposes.

[30 : 56] We can see the great kindness that God works through this book in Ruth, through to Christ for us. We know there is a happy ending, because of the great kindness shown to us in Christ.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the book of Ruth. We thank you that you're a God who is sovereign in all things.

That you are working your purposes out daily. Father, help us to trust in you, in the midst of our despair and our anguish. May we trust in you, in all things.

Father, we do indeed thank you for your great kindness that you've shown us in Christ. We pray that we may live lives that reflect this.

Amen.