

Responding to God in Crisis

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- [0 : 00] I would normally go and continue the Galatians series, but I would not have had enough time to prepare that.! So instead, I'm preaching another message which I trust will be profitable to our souls.
- It is from the book of Ruth. So if you have your Bibles, please turn there. The book of Ruth, chapter 1. And we'll be considering this morning verses 1 through 5.
- The book of Ruth, verses 1 through 5. I want to begin this morning by asking a question.
- How do you respond when things in your life are going in a drastically different direction than your plan?
- And you're faced with problems that seem larger than life. How do you respond? What do you do when circumstances in your life seem to be mocking you as a Christian?
- [1 : 26] Mocking you so much so that you are tempted to wonder if God is even active in your life. Or to put it simply, what's your approach to facing problems in life?
- And we face them. Perhaps it's prolonged illness. You may be facing a situation this morning where barring a miracle from God, there's nothing else that doctors and medicines can do for you.
- Maybe it's financial. Maybe it's financial. You're facing a financial crisis or just general hardship, overwhelmed by debt. Perhaps just can't make the ends meet.
- Maybe you're facing relational breakdown. Your marriage is strained. It's difficult. Perhaps headed for divorce or separation. Or maybe it's prolonged singleness.
- You're getting on in years. Your desire is to marry, but the prospect of marriage seems to be absent from your radar screen. For some, it might be childlessness.
- [2 : 45] You and your husband have been trying for years to have a child, but the desire has not yet been realized. Or maybe it's a dead-end career, a job that seems to be headed nowhere.
- And you have limited prospects. Perhaps you're facing some other difficulty that I did not mention. But in the book of Ruth in general, and in these verses that we're going to consider in particular, whatever difficult circumstances you are facing or will face, God addresses you.
- God addresses us. In this book and in these verses. So please follow along as I read Ruth chapter 1, verses 1 through 5.
- 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.
- [4 : 09] And the names of his two sons were Malon and Kilion. 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.

They took Moabite wives. The name of the one was Orpah. And the name of the other, Ruth. They lived there about ten years.

And both Malon and Kilion died. So that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Let's pray together.

Lord, we thank you this morning that the things that were written before in times past were written for our benefit.

[5 : 14] That we might have endurance. And that we might have patience. And that we may learn how you have graciously dealt with your people and thereby be encouraged.

I pray, Lord, that as we open this little book, this obscure book, this often neglected book, this book that we often times would read in passing at a surface level.

Lord, speak to our hearts from it. Lord, I ask, Lord, that you would cause us all to be attentive and more than attentive, to be receptive to your word.

Lord, I pray, Lord, that you would grant me grace to be faithful and to serve these whom I love and desire to serve.

Father, would you grant me grace to be faithful and more than to be faithful and more than to be faithful and to be faithful and more than to be faithful and more than to be faithful and more than to be faithful. And I pray that you would grant me the presence and power of your spirit to bring your word to your people today.

[6 : 34] Lord, I pray that you would grant me the presence of your people today. Lord, I pray that you will watch over your word in our lives and cause it to fulfill the purpose that you have sent it to.

I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, in these first five verses of the book of Ruth, we have the introduction to this book.

And in the book of Ruth, as we consider these introductory verses, what we find is that we are introduced to the majority of the characters in the book of Ruth.

In this book, there are seven named characters. And in these five verses, we are introduced to six of them. And by the end of these five verses, three of them have died.

And three are left. And soon, one of the three, a lady by the name of Orpah, will disappear. And so that by the end of chapter one, only two of the named characters mentioned in these opening verses are left.

[7 : 50] There are these two women, Ruth and Naomi. And then in chapter two, we are introduced to the last character in the book of Ruth.

And he's a man by the name of Boaz. But there's another character in the book of Ruth. This character is not named.

And actually, he is the main character. And really, the book of Ruth is about this character who is not named. And that character is God himself.

And it's easy to miss this character because he is not named. But if we miss this character, we miss the point of the book of Ruth.

And indeed, we miss the point of the message this morning. These first five verses of the book of Ruth lay out for us a severe set of circumstances that were faced by a man and his family.

[8 : 56] And from these verses, I believe that God wants to address us. God wants to speak to us. Because if we are not facing a problem currently, if we are not in some crisis currently, if we live long enough, we will face problems or circumstances that seem bigger than life.

And here's the general lesson that we can learn from the book of Ruth, and in particular from these five verses that we've just read.

In all of life's problems, God sovereignly rules and graciously acts in the lives of his people. And this is without exception.

In all of life's problems, God sovereignly rules and graciously acts in the lives of his people.

And that's what I pray that we will see this morning from this passage and from this sermon. But the truth is, when we are walking through hard times and difficult places, it is difficult to see this truth.

[10 : 22] It is easy to forget this truth. That in all of life's problems, God is sovereignly ruling and graciously acting in the lives of his people.

And so in our remaining time this morning, I want to consider closely three aspects of Elimelech's life. And they are the circumstances he faced, the choices he made, and the consequences he wreaked.

First, Elimelech's circumstances. Elimelech, first of all, faced circumstances that were spiritually dark and dangerous.

Look at the opening words of the book of Ruth in verse 1 that tell us about the time in which Elimelech lived. We are told that it was in the days when the judges ruled.

Elimelech lived in a spiritually dark and dangerous time, the time of the judges. This was the period from the death of Joshua through the end of the ministry of Samuel, right before Saul was appointed king of Israel.

[11 : 42] It covered the period of about 350 years. That's a long time. And so you can imagine how entrenched the spiritual decay was.

This dark and dangerous time of the judges is appropriately described in the last book of Judges. If you turn right over to the last book of Judges, the last chapter of Judges, sorry, in verse 25.

Judges 21, 25 says, In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. For 350 years.

That's what they did. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Those who are familiar with the book of Judges know that it was a dark and dangerous time.

So dark and so dangerous that when you read the book of Judges, you see that it was a time when they would sacrifice children in the name of the Lord.

[12 : 48] There's a story about a priest presiding over an idol temple. There's another story about a priest who had a concubine.

He took a concubine, clearly ignoring the word of God about the kind of woman that the priest was to marry. And at one point in this priest's life, he was being threatened by some homosexual men.

And this priest takes his concubine and gives his concubine to this group of men. And scripture says they raped and abused her all night. And in the morning she died.

And this backslidden priest took his dead concubine's body and cut it into 12 pieces, limb by limb. And he sent one piece to every tribe.

And this horrific incident is the last one that's recorded in the book of Judges. It's like the apex. Of the horrors.

[13 : 55] Of what it is like to live without any reference to God. To live doing what is right in your own eyes. You can read that in chapters 19 through 21 of the book of Judges.

This horrific story. But it gives us a window into that spiritually dark and dangerous time in which Elimelech lived.

It wasn't easy. And it was for 350 long years. In addition to it being a spiritually dark and dangerous time, Elimelech also faced circumstances that were materially dry and destitute.

That's the second set of circumstances we see that he faced. In verse 1 we're told that there was a famine in the land. Food was scarce.

And interestingly, these two sets of circumstances, although they seem to be separate, they actually are connected.

[15 : 08] They are related. Properly understood in the time of the Judges, the famine was a part of God's judgment upon the nation. Upon a land where everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes.

We see this pattern in Scripture where one of the ways that God would judge those who were disobedient is he would dry up the food to cause them to look up. He would send a drought. No rain comes to cause them to look up.

And what we find in the book of Judges is we find this repeated cycle among the people where they would turn away from God. And God would turn the enemies on them.

And the enemies would oppress them as a form of God's judgment against them. And they would cry out to the Lord and they would repent. And God would mercifully send them a judge to deliver them.

The judge would deliver them. They would serve the Lord for a few years. And then the judge would die and they would turn back. God would deliver them again to the enemies.

[16 : 14] The enemies would oppress them. They would cry out to God. God would have mercy. He would forgive them. Give a judge. The judge delivers them. They would serve the Lord for the life of the judge.

And then when the judge dies, they go back to idolatry. And there's this repeated cycle. You can read about it in the book of Judges. This happened for 360 years.

The Bible was using their oppressors to deprive them of food so they would cry out to him.

So they would look to him and seek his help and seek his deliverance. That was God's intention for the famine.

It wasn't that God wanted to just punish them in a vacuum. No, God was using the famine for their good to get their attention to bring them to repentance. Those were the circumstances Elimelech faced.

[17 : 18] Spiritually dark and dangerous and materially dry and destitute. So what did Elimelech do? This brings me to the second aspect of Elimelech's life that I want to consider this morning.

Elimelech's choices. What did he do? Elimelech did not respond to God the way God wanted him to. In verse 1, we're told that Elimelech responded to God by taking his wife and his two sons, leaving Bethlehem, and going to live in the country of Moab.

The Moabites were the near relatives of the Israelites. They were the descendants of Moab, and they were produced from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his oldest daughter.

And the nation of Moab worshipped false gods. This information would have been known to Elimelech. Yet he still made a conscious choice to go to the country of Moab.

He knew the Moabites were pagans. He knew that if he had gone there, it would be difficult for him and his family to serve the Lord. More difficult in Moab than it was in Bethlehem.

[18 : 46] But he still went there. Why did he do that? The reason Elimelech did that is Elimelech was exhibiting exactly what the period of the judges was all about.

He was doing what was right in his own eyes. When you consider this story, there are two interesting contradictions contained in it.

Here is Elimelech living in Bethlehem, and the word Bethlehem means house of bread, but there is no bread. He's facing a contradiction.

His circumstances are mocking him, and he is basically saying, I'm out of here. I'm done with this. I'll find my own bread. But God brought the famine.

God brought the famine. The famine was not some happenstance that took place. No. God divinely brought the famine, and he did so to spur the people to repentance.

[19 : 58] And Elimelech's response was, I'm moving. I'm not crying out to God. There's another contradiction in that the name Elimelech means God is my king.

But what do we see as we evaluate Elimelech's life? When faced with famine, instead of remaining in the promised land of Bethlehem, instead of trusting God and repenting, he essentially says, I'll be my own king.

I'll make my own way. I'll provide my own bread for my family. And he goes off to Moab. These contradictions. He's in the house of bread.

There is no bread. He says, God is my king, but he doesn't live that way. He is his own king. He does his own thing. I want to ask you this morning, as you consider these circumstances of Elimelech, how do you face your tough circumstances?

How do you face the times of difficulty that come your way? How do you respond? What kind of choices do you make when the chips are down and the times are hard?

[21 : 23] See, the reality is, if you've trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and personal Savior, though your name is not Elimelech, God is your king.

You are no longer your own. You've been bought with a price. He is Lord of your life. And when hard and difficult circumstances come, he is still Lord of your life.

And the question is, is he Lord in crisis? Are you allowing him to rule and reign in the midst of your crisis, or do you, like Elimelech, do what is right in your own eyes?

You act as if you're your own king. You do your own thing. And you make your own way.

Perhaps right now you are facing your own dark time. You're facing your own difficulty. What kind of choices are you making? Are they reflective of one who belongs to the Lord, who submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ?

[22 : 37] Or, if evaluated, are they no different from those on the outside who are living and doing what is right in their own eyes?

See, in the midst of the trials and the difficulties, if Jesus Christ is truly Lord, we want to be getting our marching orders from him. We want to be listening to him. We want to be hearing his voice, remembering that he's sovereign over our trials as well.

He's sovereign over the famines in our lives. He's sovereign over the hard places in our lives. If he's not, then he's not sovereign. And they're not purposeless.

They are for a purpose. They are to cause us to cry out to him. That's one of the purposes that God has for the hard times in our lives. Sometimes, yes, he wants to build character in us as well to cause us to endure, but he wants us to cry out to him.

And truth be told, if all is well, many times we will not talk to God. And so he sovereignly brings the famines. He sovereignly brings the hardships to cause us to cry out to him.

[23 : 57] Now, when we consider Elimelech, it would seem like he made one choice. It would seem like he made a choice to leave Bethlehem and go to Moab.

But Elimelech made more than one choice. He made multiple choices. And they merit our evaluation.

First, Elimelech made a choice about community. Elimelech chose to leave the promised land where God had placed him and connected him to others with whom he shared a common history.

And see, although there was a famine in Bethlehem, from this account, there was no mass exodus to Moab. As a matter of fact, as you read on in this story, when Ruth returns to Bethlehem, life is going on.

There's a man by the name of Boaz, and he is serving the Lord, and he has a vast household and has vast holdings. And he was living in the midst of a spiritually dark time as well.

[25 : 08] So even in the midst of the darkness, there was still community. God was still at work. God still had his people. But Elimelech chose to leave. Elimelech made a choice about community.

It seems like he was just leaving with his family, but no, he was doing more than that. He was making a choice about community.

Elimelech was essentially saying, bread that perishes is more important than spiritual community with God and the people of God that endures for eternity.

And just as we think about this particular aspect of Elimelech's life, how for him everything came down just to bread, I believe we should consider our own value of community, the value that we place on community, the value that we place on the relationships that God has given to us with brothers and sisters in the local church.

Are you okay with walking to your own drumbeat or are you tied to the rhythm of spiritual community?

[26 : 31] Are you indifferent to the decisions that you make personally and how those decisions would impact your spiritual life? And you just let community fall wherever community falls.

And from time to time, we're all faced with situations and circumstances whereby we have to make decisions. And sometimes those decisions may take us away from God's house and from God's people.

Sometimes it may be a job consideration. I want to say to you this morning, when you consider a job, the amount of money is not the primary driving factor in choosing that job.

Because that job can disappear overnight. And many jobs have. It's so important to hear the Lord away from those external trappings.

God, what would you have to do? Yes, sometimes the Lord does move a person from community by a relocation based on work. But when we do that, we need to factor in what is the impact of this on my life spiritually and on spiritual community that I can enjoy.

[27 : 53] many people are guided more by bread than God. Another choice that Elimelech made was a choice about his family.

Elimelech made a choice about his family and his sons in particular. I'm sure if we could have interviewed Elimelech and said, why did you do this?

Why did you leave Bethlehem to go to Moab? He probably said, I did it for the children. I wanted them to have something better. You know, this 350 years, this is a long time. It's been like this. Things are never going to change. I want them to have something better.

Life is too hard in Bethlehem. But Elimelech disregarded the fragile constitution of his two sons.

Evidently, from the names that Elimelech gave his sons at birth, he recognized that they were weak. And to see this, you'd have to appreciate the way children would have been named in ancient times.

[29 : 07] They didn't just name children by taking a piece of the grandmother's name and the auntie's name and meshing them together. They didn't name them in that way. They named them, they named them based on some perception about the child, based on some insight about the child.

And you can see this through other pages of scripture. At birth, Elimelech recognized that both of his sons were weak. The name Malon in the original language means sickly.

You don't name your child sickly if your child is well and looking well, but he, the same sickly, named him Malon. And the other son, Kilion, means wasting.

And it would appear that these boys from very early on when they were born exhibited indications of weakness in body and in constitution.

And yet, Elimelech takes them to a foreign land in search of bread because he refused to acknowledge God in his crisis. He refused to cry out to God for mercy.

[30 : 22] He refused to put his trust in God. And so he put his children in the middle of this. Well, having considered Elimelech's circumstances and his choices, let's now consider his consequences.

The consequences he faced as a result of those choices. The third and finally, Elimelech's consequences.

Well, things didn't turn out the way Elimelech planned them to turn out. And we're alerted to this in verse 3 that begins with the conjunction but.

See, his plans are laid out in verses 1 and 2. But in verse 3 it says but. Elimelech reaped some consequences he didn't plan for.

Apparently, there was bread in Moab because he ended up staying there. But Scripture tells us sometime later Elimelech died. His sons were left with their mother and they faced the choice of returning to Bethlehem or staying in Moab.

[31 : 47] They stayed. And here we see another consequence is that in a sense we can say this is an indication that Elimelech lost his sons spiritually.

It's evidenced by the fact that they chose to stay in Moab and they chose to marry Moabite women showing that they were identifying with a pagan people and a pagan land more than they identified with their own people and the promised land.

Their decision shows that like their father they were doing what was right in their own hands. Now we don't know how long Malon and Kilion were married but Scripture says they had no children.

and for the nation of Israel with its special covenant relationship with God in that community barrenness was a sign of God's judgment for disobedience.

Generally speaking not in every single case but it was an indication of that. And so the death of Elimelech and the barrenness of their marriages still did not get the attention of Malon Kilion and Naomi.

[33 : 14] They still didn't connect the dots together to say you know what things aren't turning out exactly the way Elimelech said that they would.

I mean read in verse 5 that after about 10 years both boys died and now Naomi is left all alone. Her husband and her sons are dead.

Things didn't go as planned. She's in crisis. But the grass looked greener. The grass when they were in Bethlehem the grass looked greener on the side of Moab.

And so they went and Naomi has now had to learn the hard way. So what are the consequences that Elimelech reaped?

Well apart from himself dying the consequences are his two dead sons and a bitter wife. And as I consider this the words of the song God moves in a mysterious way by Augustus Toplady he wrote this line blind unbelief is sure to air blind unbelief is sure to air brothers and sisters when we're not trusting God when we are not looking to him in the midst of our problems our blind unbelief is sure to air that's what happened with this family in Christ we are to respond to God by seeking his perspective trusting him we don't run from

[35 : 18] God we don't seek our own way when we do that we compound the problem we prolong the problem these opening these opening verses they seem very very sad I mean can you imagine this woman and if this were to happen to a woman today with all of the provisions to take care of widows that would still be difficult but when you think about this happening back then this was a horrific position to be and your husband is dead and your two sons are dead and you're in a foreign land and it's easy to focus on that aspect of the story it's easy to focus on the fact that this woman is in such a destitute condition but you know we should consider and ask the question why was

Naomi spared how is it that Elimelech has died her sons have died and she's alive more than likely Elimelech discussed with Naomi what he was going to do more than likely he got her blessing and support for the idea that we're going to leave Bethlehem and we're going to go over to Moab he probably initiated but she went along with it after her husband's death even if one could say well she followed her husband after her husband's death she was in a position to say to her sons let's go back she didn't do that she allowed them to marry pagan wives and so the question is why did God spare her why did God not allow her to have a similar faith as her husband and her sons

Naomi was spared for one reason she was spared because of sovereign grace she was not better than a level she was not more deserving than him not more holy than him Naomi was spared for one reason God chose in his mercy to spare her even though she deserved to die she deserved to die in Moab just like her husband just like her sons because she was disobedient just as they were disobedient and giving Naomi grace God foreshadowed the grace to undeserving sinners that we who have come to trust Christ have received no better than the others who are perishing no better than the others whose lives are being destroyed I think all of us can think I can think of friends that I ran with and by the grace of God my path is different but it shouldn't have necessarily been different it's only different because of the mercy and the grace of God and God was foreshadowing in his dealings with Naomi how he gives grace to the undeserving those who deserve to die sinners like you and me and these five verses as dark as they are

God was graciously foreshadowing the hope of Christ for all sinners so when we consider Elimelech's life Elimelech's disobedience and his mission resulted in death it points us to Christ's obedience and his mission that resulted in life Elimelech left Bethlehem in disobedience to go to Moab Jesus Christ came to Bethlehem he left heaven he came to Bethlehem in obedience that he may have life and this place in scripture tells us prophesied in the book of Micah that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem this place that was marked by the disobedience of Elimelech is now marked by the obedience of Christ who left heaven to come there in obedience to his father's love for those of us this morning who have put our faith in

Jesus Christ the temptation that we will all face in the midst of crisis is to do what is right in our own life it is to do what we think will alleviate the crisis but instead what we must remember is this in all of life's problems even in crisis even in sin God is sovereignly ruling over and graciously active in the lives of his people there's never a moment in time there's never a circumstance in life that we are away from the sovereign sway of God's ruling in our lives and even in the midst of our hard places in the midst of our difficulties God is being gracious to us always being gracious to us he's always being kind to us and I say to us this morning especially those who are not aware of any particular difficulty or trial that we're facing we need to hear this before the trial comes because sometimes the trial is so hard and so hot it's hard to believe that

[41 : 33] God is sovereign over it that God is actively working in the midst of it so I encourage us this morning I don't know what you're facing exactly and I don't know what you may face in the days ahead but allow these words to fall into your heart to be cemented upon your heart God is at work God is sovereign over all the chaos and the crisis and he has a sovereign plan in the midst of it and we need to look to him and we need to trust him for that sovereign plan I don't know why this is the sermon the Lord laid on my heart this morning with the short period of time that I had I needed to do a sermon that I preached before and as

I poured over various sermons I felt this is the one that God laid in my heart for us this morning I pray that you take it not just as a word from me this morning but really as a word from the Lord and it could very well be that in the providence of the Lord the Lord has orchestrated all these things that this is certainly not the sermon that Shalmy is going to preach it's a different sermon and you're here this morning this may be for what you are going through now this may be for what may be awaiting you in the days ahead I encourage you to receive it this morning as a word from the Lord to help you to remember that you need to be responding to him not just to your circumstances not just doing what you think will alleviate the crisis because as we see when we do that without reference to God like a limelight we don't eliminate it we deepen!

So may God help us to receive this word this morning that's good