

Ruth 1: Three Funerals and a Wedding

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[0 : 00] And we can reread these famous words in verse 16. But Ruth said, Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also, if anything but death parts me from you.

And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said, No more. Now I thought it would be helpful over the next few months when I've been asked to preach a few times to work through a series or a book.

And I've been led to the book of Ruth. And I hope that you enjoy what I've got to say as much as I've enjoyed studying it again.

Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible that is named after a woman. The other book, of course, is Esther. And they couldn't be more different in many ways.

[1 : 18] You remember, of course, that Esther was a queen. A Jewish queen that married a Gentile king. And Ruth was a pagan from Moab who married a Jew, Boaz.

The book of Esther opens with a great feast. And, of course, the book of Ruth opens with a famine. And, of course, the book of Esther ends with the hanging of Haman. While Ruth ends with the birth of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David.

And, of course, an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ. But, in many ways, the books are similar because both Esther and Ruth tell us about God's faithfulness during bleak and testing times.

There are times in history and the history of the church when it seems as if God has forgotten his people. The times that we heard about this morning.

[2 : 32] The times of the judges. But yet, what we see in Ruth and what we see in Esther is that all the time, God is working out his purposes perfectly and faithfully.

The story of Ruth is a tragic book, but it's also a beautiful book. It's a simple story, but yet it's profound and deep.

In many ways, it's so ordinary. It's about an ordinary family. And yet, it's an extraordinary story. It's full of deep and rich theology.

And, of course, in Ruth, we have the gospel. The kinsman redeemer who saves the outsider.

The covenant God who loves the stranger. The widow and the orphan. And over the next few months, hopefully, we'll see several themes coming out of Ruth time and time again.

[3 : 44] We see the theme of returning. We see this theme particularly in chapter 1 where this word returning keeps coming up again and again.

I think the word return is used 15 times in the book of Ruth and it's nearly all in chapter 1. We see in Ruth the theme of God's hesed, God's loving kindness, that is used again and again to sinners and to outsiders.

We see this in verse 8 when Naomi says, May the Lord deal kindly with you. This theme of God's loving kindness comes up again and again.

And, of course, Ruth is famous for the theme of the kinsman redeemer. Boaz is the kinsman redeemer. A near relative who comes to save Ruth. And, of course, that points towards the Lord Jesus Christ.

And there's also the theme of providence in the book of Ruth. How God hasn't forgotten our lives or his church or God is not absent in history but God is at work all the time even in times of national and personal disaster.

[5 : 04] Somebody has said, the lesson of the book of Ruth is that there is a river running through all the events of history winding its way both to the mountaintops of blessings and into the valley of

despair and desolation.

And over the next few months hopefully we can see and understand a little bit more of that river that flows both from the mountaintops of blessing into the valley of despair and desolation.

So what do we notice in Ruth chapter 1? Well, the first thing we notice is rebellion in verses 1 to 5. We want to notice this in two ways.

First of all, it was a time of national rebellion and it was a time of personal rebellion. If you flick back to the last verse of Judges 21 it puts the first verse of Ruth 1 in context because we're told that the book of Ruth takes place in the days when the judges ruled.

Now what kind of days were they? Well, the last verse of Judges 21 tells us in those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

[6 : 20] It was a period of political and national anarchy. there was no central authority in Israel. Everyone did exactly as they pleased.

They did what was right in their own eyes. Israel had departed from God's standard, from God's commandments and it was a time of relativism.

What is relativism? Well, relativism is that there is no absolute standard. We can do one thing today and we can do another thing tomorrow. And of course relativism leads to a whole bunch of contradictions.

If you and I go out on a fox hunt next Saturday we'll have thousands of people protesting against us. If we kill a whale or if we kill a dog there'll be an outcry.

But yet we can kill thousands of babies in the womb year after year. That's relativism. Since the 1st of January this year four million babies have been killed in the world.

[7 : 26] through abortion. That is a relative a relativistic society. And that's what we have in the days of the judges.

Now of course when we read Hebrews 11 good people were raised up judges were raised up Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah and Deborah good godly and good and slightly imperfect leaders were raised up and things were okay for a while but then they went back to the way they were.

Judges chapter 2 verse 18 says whenever the Lord whenever the Lord raised up judges for them the Lord was with the judge and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them but whenever the judge died they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers going after other gods and serving them and bowing down to them.

So a judge was raised up things were okay for a while people turned back to the Lord the judge died and they went back to idolatry and God disciplined them again and again through enemies attacking them and they never learned the lesson.

And of course we see in the story of Gideon we see the Midianites raiding and robbing them of wheat and food and that is why the agricultural economy was devastated during this time and it could have contributed to the famine that we heard of in Ruth chapter 1.

[9 : 08] So it was a time of national rebellion it was a time of chaos it was a time of confusion and it was a time of desperation for the people of Israel. But Ruth the story of Ruth is a story not just of national rebellion but of personal rebellion and in the middle of this national chaos and rebellion we see that God focuses in on an individual family the family of Elimelech and Naomi and as we'll see over the next few months names and words are very important in the story of Ruth and as you know if you know the story Elimelech means my God is king and Naomi means pleasant and also Bethlehem as you probably know means house of bread so here we have in the first five verses this family are travelling from the house of bread to the land of Moab a place where they have been forbidden to go now we might say just as an aside here that when famine comes into a situation or comes into a nation that God has abandoned that nation but actually when we look at famines in the Bible we actually see that God is very often at work in a famine we can think back to

Genesis 41 to 50 when Joseph was in prison and Joseph had had those false allegations made against him by Potiphar's wife he found himself in that prison and he interpreted Joseph's dream and how did that all come about it came about through a famine you remember when Joseph had his two sons when he was prime minister he called them Ephraim and Manasseh Ephraim God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction see what Joseph did when he was in that prison he waited on the Lord he waited patiently on the Lord remember the famine in 2nd Kings chapter 6 and

7 the siege of Samaria remember the four lepers that came out and found the camp of the Amorites the Amorites had been deserted because they had heard a great noise God had used a famine to bring about his purposes what about famines in the New Testament are there any famines in the New Testament remember the prodigal son the prodigal son took his inheritance he squandered it with prostitutes and then he got a job as a pig farmer because a great famine came into the land and it was the famine that brought him to his senses and sent him back to his father's house how often does God use famines in the Bible and in history to carry out his purposes and if God uses famines why can't he use other things in our lives to bring about his purposes when we get a difficult diagnosis when we struggle with a difficult relationship could it be that God rather than abandoning us is actually at work in our lives and could it be that God is actually calling us to wait patiently on him through that suffering so we see in Ruth that God was at work in the famine and we see that Elimelech sojourns or literally turns aside to the land of Moab this land that he had been forbidden to go to he could have moved anywhere couldn't he he could have moved to a place where Jehovah was worshipped but he chose to go to a place that worshipped a false god he chose to go to a place of idolatry you remember that Moab was a land where the descendants of Lot had settled and famously the Moabites had refused to give food and drink to the Israelites when they were in the wilderness you see the problem with Elimelech was that he was a pragmatist and pragmatism won the day over principle and you see what are the consequences consequences well the consequences is that

Elimelech pays a heavy price for disobedience he dies his sons die who have now married two local girls Ruth and Orpah instead of waiting on the Lord Elimelech went to a place he shouldn't have gone and you see the first chapter of Ruth is Elimelech runs from God while Ruth runs to God you see words are fascinating in the book of Ruth you notice when you read the first chapter of Ruth that whenever it talks about Judah it talks about the land of Judah but whenever it talks about Moab it talks about the country of Moab in verses 1 and 2 and 6 and 7 why is that?

you see the Hebrew word for land used here is the same word that is used in Genesis 1 for earth a vast expanse of territory now of course Judah wasn't a big area but you see the word play here is that whenever they talk about Judah the writer is trying to help us understand although Judah was small it was rich in covenant blessings and Moab although a big area was small in terms of blessing however full and rich Moab looked it would never satisfy those who went there you know if we're ever tempted to go back from the Lord if we're ever tempted to turn our back just remember Elimelech just remember that a name is never enough Elimelech's name was my God is king he had a great name he had a great heritage but it wasn't enough a name isn't enough an affiliation to a church isn't enough a Christian family isn't enough and religion isn't enough only faith in Christ alone is enough and if anyone tonight here is running from God if you are living in disobedience take a long look at Elimelech and Naomi and you see the consequences of what happens when we run from God it doesn't end well so we see rebellion but then secondly we see redemption in verses 6 to 18 we see in verse 14 we see three weeping women they had heard that

[17:19] God had visited Bethlehem and they set off from Moab back to Bethlehem and notice the phrase that's used there she had heard how the Lord had visited his people and given them food you notice that she doesn't say that there was a turnaround in the economy she doesn't say that the economy had picked up she doesn't say that the threat of invasion had gone she doesn't say that there was a bumper harvest that year she says the Lord has visited his people and given them food and you see the writer of Ruth is bringing us constantly back to Jehovah the covenant God the self-existent and eternal one and you see in Ruth we see his name used 18 times she is constantly bringing us back to God and to Jehovah and far from abandoning his people God was there all the time working through

Providence guiding and directing all his creatures and all their actions you see Moab had given them what sin always gives us grief and tears heartache sorrow and loss it's interesting these women they were crying for different reasons weren't they Orpah was crying because she missed Moab she wished she hadn't gone from Moab and she wanted to go back Naomi wept because she regretted leaving Bethlehem and she wanted to go home she was shedding tears of repentance she wished she had never left Bethlehem with her husband what about Ruth well I think Ruth was weeping tears of regret she wished she wished she hadn't stayed for so long in that pagan place and you see one of the first marks of grace that we see on somebody that is seeking the

Lord is a refusal to go back to their old ways but Ruth said do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you she refused to go back to Moab she refused to go back to her old ways and that's one of the first marks of grace where did Ruth see faith in Moab how is it that how is it that Ruth wants to follow Naomi where did she find out about this covenant God in Moab did she hear about this God from the prophets did she read it in the scriptures did she hear about it in the synagogues well no because there were no prophets there were no synagogues in Moab who did she see who did she hear about this covenant

God well the only answer must be that she saw it in Naomi she saw something in Naomi's life that drew her to this covenant God now we might think reading Ruth 1 that Naomi was a very very flawed witness but she was a witness she was a witness FB Meyer says she had never seen a suffering soul bear itself so heroically she felt that in the Hebrew faith there was something which Chemosh the false God had never imparted to her people she craved for herself some of the holy radiance that lingered on the worn face of Naomi more people watch her bearing than we think let us attract them to Jesus you know we think that people will come to Christ through signs and wonders we think if we put on loud music and entertainment people will come to Christ but what does Ruth 1 teach us it teaches us that as Christians if we bear affliction with patience people will see that and people will be attracted to Christ through that there was something about Naomi in the way that she bore her trials in the way that she suffered loss the loss of her husband and her two sons there was something there was some patience in that suffering that attracted Ruth to the covenant God and then we see in verses 16 and 17 this incredible testimony that has been used by the church down through the centuries what an amazing testimony we see that Ruth found a new path for her feet for where you go I will go Ruth wanted a new direction she wanted to go in a different way she was fed up with

[22 : 50] Moab she was fed up with Chemosh she was fed up with the child sacrifices she wanted a different way Jesus spoke about the broad road that leads to destruction and how many people are on that road in Matthew 7 and we are commanded to enter in at the straight gate some of us were watching the rugby yesterday and you see these vast stadiums don't you of 60,000 people how did they get in they got in one by one through the turnstiles one by one and that's how we must enter the narrow way individually and personally we can't take any baggage with us we have to enter in at the narrow gate without our sin and then we see that Ruth had a new place to dwell where you lodge

I will lodge Ruth wanted to be in Naomi's home she wanted to dwell with her why? because she wanted to be with the Lord's people where the Lord's people dwelt she knew the covenant people of God worshipped God in their homes and she wanted to be in that home she wanted to live with Naomi in that atmosphere maybe when you first started searching for the things of the Lord there were certain homes that you went to there were certain fellowships that you went to there were certain people that you wanted to be with because you felt from them the fragrance of Christ and we can be disappointed with church we can be hurt with church we can be neglected by the church but let's never forget that Christ died for the church and we must always commit ourselves to a local Bible believing church if we want to grow as

Christians and Naomi says Ruth says your people will be my people she wants a new people to love isn't this amazing Ruth hasn't even met the people of God and yet she wants those people to be her people Ruth's heart goes out in love to a people she's never even met and what does John say to us he says how do we know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren and the great mark of grace in Ruth's life is that she loves the people of God she loves them with a burning affection she was alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and yet she loved the people of God and she has a new peace in her heart your God will be my God the big question for all of us tonight is not do we believe in

God we're told that the demons believe in God and tremble the great question tonight is God your God is this God my God you see Ruth wanted to be at peace with God she wanted to be at peace with God she recognised that she was a sinner and that she was at enmity with God and you see by faith Ruth looked forward to the day when Jesus would die and reconcile sinners to God to the shedding of his own blood Ruth didn't understand the intricacies of the atonement she didn't understand justification by faith but she reached forward by faith and she was saved and we see lastly a new prospect for her life where you die I will die and there will I be buried Ruth had no fear of death the fear of death had been taken away her trust was in

God she knew that God would take care of her she knew that death was not the end she could say with Job even after my skin is destroyed in my flesh I will see God notice how resolute Ruth is regardless of what Naomi said her mind was made up she was going to go she was going to follow this covenant God at this stage Ruth knows very little almost nothing but she saw enough to say I want more of that doesn't that encourage you as we witness to family as we witness to neighbours as our imperfect flawed witness people might see something in us and say

[28 : 17] I want more of that that's what we need what was God's purpose in Ruth it was that Ruth would become a trophy of grace that she would come to know God's loving kindness and what's God doing in the book of Ruth in all this rebellion in all this chaos in all this darkness and suffering he was quarrying for diamonds he was quarrying for diamonds he wasn't just providing bread in Bethlehem but ultimately through Ruth he was providing the bread of life the Lord Jesus Christ would eventually come through Ruth and Boaz so we see redemption and then lastly we see return in verses 19 to 22 so we've noticed how important words are in the book of Ruth and this word return is so important in the whole book of Ruth but particularly in chapter 1 the word return is used 15 times in the book of Ruth and it's used 12 times in this first chapter sometimes it's translated as it is in verse 21

I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty sometimes it's translated as turn back in verses 11 and 12 and another times it's translated as return you know when you listen to music and you listen to a symphony there are certain notes that are played that you listen to and in this symphony of the story of Ruth this note of return is played again and again and you see God in the book of Ruth is telling us that this isn't just a physical journey it's a spiritual journey we've got Ruth coming to know the Lord she's being redeemed but you see there's another journey going on it's the journey of Naomi a back slid Israelite who followed her husband in rebellion to Moab she's coming back as well she's returning and you see we see this word beautifully used in chapter 4 verse 15 the exact same word is used in a different way he shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age for your daughter-in-law who loves you who is more to you than seven sons has given birth to him you see that word return is translated restorer of life he shall be to you a restorer of life you see this word return is like a melody throughout the whole book of Ruth and this widow who followed her husband in rebellion against God has been lovingly brought back into the covenant community once again what does the covenant community say to her is this

Naomi is this Naomi they hardly recognize this woman who has suffered years of pain and loss and bereavement and what does Naomi say don't call me Naomi call me Mara or bitter for the almighty has dealt very bitterly with me why doesn't Naomi use the word that she's used before the Lord or Jehovah why does she say the almighty why does she change the way that she talks about God well again words are fascinating in the book of Ruth you see and the almighty is the Hebrew word Shaddai which means God almighty and we see it used time and time again in the Old Testament and we see it we find it used in passages where God can transform man's helplessness into blessing we see it in Genesis 17 when God confronts a 99 year old

Abraham with the promise of children he says I am God almighty walk before me and be blameless we see it used in Genesis 43 verse 14 Jacob reluctantly lets his sons return to Egypt he says may God almighty grant you mercy before the man that was Joseph you see this reference to God almighty is all about God God's protection at times of great uncertainty as one commentator has said the God who is at his best when man is at his worst and you see where does Naomi place or where does she deposit all her bitterness in God almighty she doesn't understand what's happened to her how can anyone understand when their husband has died and both her sons have died how can she understand that she went out full and she's come back empty she doesn't understand it but God almighty

El Shaddai does you can almost hear Naomi say you can see the bitterness I have experienced the famine the bereavements the questionings the partings the apparent hopelessness but I know God as Shaddai and I can leave the explanation and even the responsibility of this bitterness with him you see on this return journey Naomi saw that not only was God in control not only that God was almighty but also she also saw the loving kindness of the Lord she knew him as God almighty Shaddai and she also knew him as Jehovah the God who welcomed her into the covenant of love sometimes to us suffering appears so meaningless it appears so difficult to understand but the great thing tonight is that we can trust the same

[35 : 19] God almighty that he has a purpose and that his loving kindness will carry us through whatever we face and of course as New Testament Christians we see that most fully in the Lord Jesus Christ he knew what it was to suffer he knew what it was to be abandoned he knew what it was to be rejected he was the great suffering servant and how much more can we go to our great high priest who is touched with a feeling of our infirmity and as we go on and study the book of Ruth we'll see that Naomi begins to fade a little from view but our suffering is not wasted God doesn't waste a drop of suffering she becomes the interpreter of events in chapter 2 and she becomes the agent of so much that happens in chapters 3 and 4 she's the one that encourages

Ruth to marry Boaz you see as we look underneath the tapestry of our lives we see lots of different dark threads don't we but when we turn it over we see one day or we will see one day the beautiful picture of that tapestry that God is love so often we see in the Bible that God was quarrying for diamonds and that's what we have in Ruth and Naomi two trophies of grace two diamonds that God has quarried there is so much that is unknown to us why do things happen why do some families quietly struck with tragedy and others seem to prosper but the great thing is that God almighty Shaddai knows all our tomorrows

God sees the end from the beginning and he asks us to live by faith and not by sight how could these two lonely widows as they walk from Moab to Bethlehem weeping with each other how could they know that God had marked out Boaz for Ruth that this pagan girl would marry Boaz that she would have great blessing through him and that through Ruth and Boaz eventually the saviour would come and be a blessing to the whole world we just don't know our future but God knows the end from the beginning so what do we learn from Ruth we learn that rebellion leads to disaster we learn that God saves the most unlikely candidates and we learn that we are safe in the hands of God that's why

God gives us these great stories in the Bible to comfort us when trouble comes what God was to Ruth and Naomi he will be to us and the question for all of us tonight is do we know this God have we come like Ruth and Naomi to a point when we are emptied of everything and we say what Ruth said for where you go I will go and where you lodge I will lodge your people shall be my people and your God my God that is the testament of the child of God that is somebody who knows the grace of God in their life and the big question for each one of us tonight is does that describe you and does that describe me are we willing to lay down everything and follow the covenant

God of Ruth and Naomi we are offered the greatest invitation that anyone will ever offer you tonight Moab will give you nothing but trouble this world will give you nothing but trouble and death but in Christ we are offered life and peace the great kinsman redeemer who came to die for each one of us he offers us life and peace tonight and the great question is will you accept him God bless our thoughts on these things let us pray our gracious God we thank you for the story of Ruth we thank you for your loving kindness in the covenant we thank you for your faithfulness oh Lord in difficult times both nationally and personally we thank you for sending that great kinsman redeemer the Lord Jesus Christ and we ask oh Lord that by faith we would lay hold of him tonight

[40 : 46] Lord speak to us through the book of Ruth help us oh God to remember these things when trouble comes across our way help us to be mindful Lord of your faithfulness in difficult times we pray Lord for anyone who is struggling tonight with a heavy heart we pray for anyone who is dreading this week ahead Lord we pray that you would bless them and we pray that Lord you would give them a sense of your presence and a sense of your peace and that you would bless what they have heard tonight to their souls so Lord bless your word we pray may it not return to you void for all we ask is in Jesus name Amen so let's conclude our service by singing from the Scottish Psalter in Psalm 40 Psalm 40 very appropriate words for what we've been thinking about tonight

I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did bear at length to me he did incline my voice and cry to hear we're just going to sing verses 1 to 5 but we see this word loving kindness cropping up in Psalm 40 in verses 10 and 11 thy kindness which most loving is concealed have not I and thy tender mercies Lord for me oh do thou not the strain so we see this theme of God's loving kindness in all these Psalms we've sung tonight so let's finish by singing Psalm 40 and we'll sing verses 1 to 5 to God's praise