

# Ruth 1

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Date: 12 September 2021

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I wonder if you would take the Bible from in front of you and turn to the book of Ruth. It's hidden in page, in the Old Testament, page 222.

That would be just terrific. As you're finding that, we're going to have a live musical reflection at the end of our meditation on Ruth chapter 1. Ruth chapter 1. And I just want to say what a great relief it is to come to this little book in the Old Testament.

It begins with these words, in the days when the judges, literally when the judges judged, there was a famine in the land.

And immediately we know it's a time of violence, grim chaos, division, disintegration in the land of Israel, when people went running after other gods and did what was right in their own eyes.

And every time God brings the consequences of their actions of defiance back on them, they cry out to God for a redeemer and he sends a judge who would judge them and redeem them.

[ 1 : 13 ] And no sooner are they delivered, back to the other gods again, the cycle begins. And when you go through the book of the judges, each judge is more corrupt and more bizarre than the last.

And it just proves the complete futility of all human judgmentalism to bring anything good. I think we live in a very judgmental time.

We are surrounded by divisions and chaos and our circumstances feel completely out of control.

Some of us even wonder out of God's control. But we're absolutely furiously certain about our own position on anything.

And we're going to cancel anyone on the other side and we're going to signal our own virtue. Forget forgiveness. I want to live with outrage. Some of us, perhaps.

That's why it's such a relief to come to the book of Ruth. Despite living in such a dark time, there are no international scandals or national politics or bad guys.

[ 2 : 19 ] It's the account of one ordinary family. Real people, real places, the intimacies of the daily circumstances of their lives.

And as we move through this book, we are drawn into their lives with great skill. You'll see it as soon as we start going on it. The story is told with such gentleness and reserve.

It's about the hiddenness of God's hand in the daily circumstances of our lives. Just as we feel sometimes God's hand is hidden from us.

Particularly in circumstances that are bitter and difficult and painful and unexplainable. And God only acts twice in the book, once in chapter 1 and once in chapter 4.

But the hidden hand of God is directing everything in the book, large and small, according to his loving purposes, toward the glory of his son Jesus Christ.

[ 3 : 23 ] We'll see a glimpse of that at the end of the sermon. And I think, and I encourage you to take it and read it, you can't help by the end but just wonder at the beauty of God's ways in our lives.

How he takes up our ordinary messy lives into his purposes. So, three scenes this morning in chapter 1. And the first one I've called The Emptying of Naomi, verses 1 to 5.

It's the picture of acute suffering in one family and the experience of moving from fullness to emptiness. We already know about the double darkness in the first phrase.

Judges, famine. Famine is God's response to Israel's defiance. It makes every life in Israel fragile. Every family. And instead of then going and hearing about the leadership of the nation, we are introduced, verse 1, to a man of Bethlehem and Judah.

And when you go through narrative books like this, the names are very important. Very important. There's a painful irony here. Bethlehem means house of bread, house of food.

[ 4 : 31 ] But here they are in a famine meant to be a place of blessing and plenty. And as soon as we take in that irony, this man, this certain man, takes a fateful decision that's going to change everything.

In verse 1, he takes his wife and two sons for a short sojourn in the land of Moab. And we say, really?

Really? Moab? Moab are the enemies of Israel. This is a nation that curses Israel, that seduces Israel. This is a nation that worships the god Chemosh, who demands literal human child sacrifices to provide food and rain and bread.

You want to take your two boys to that country so that they'll flourish? And we wonder, does this man see this famine as the hand of God in judgment and think, well, I need to preserve the life of wife and sons?

Well, I'll go where there's food like Abraham did with Egypt. Or do we think he should have turned to God and cried out to him and trusted the hidden hand of God? We're not told. We're not given any clear guidance.

[ 5 : 41 ] There's no judgment on him. And before we find out that it's in fact a very bad move, we're told the names of the family. Elimelech, which means my God is king.

Naomi, which means sweetness and honey pie. The two boys' names, sickness and annihilation. Not popular these days, those two names.

Verse 3, no sooner do they arrive, Elimelech the father dies. And we hear the news from Naomi's perspective. She is left and bereft, a widow in a strange land.

And the boys take Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. And after 10 years, there's no children. Why didn't they return to Judah? And then both boys die in Moab.

And again, verse 5, we hear this from Naomi's point of view. The woman was left without her two sons and her husband. It's a beautiful and simple understatement.

[ 6 : 45 ] It's not just that the three men in the family have been dispatched with unseemly speed. It is a profound and tragic loss. And what it does is it throws Naomi to the centre of our stage.

She is a woman without hope, without a future, without security. And we come to the end of the first paragraph and we go, why? I mean, why are we being told this?

And why does God allow this? Where is God when things seem so hopeless and insecure and bleak? It's a question that comes again and again to us through the news.

This week as we celebrated 9-11, 20 years. So the emptying of Naomi. Number 2, verses 6 to 17, the conversion of Ruth.

Now you might notice this, but the first five verses took 10 years. And now the next 12 verses take one day. So everything slows right down.

[ 7 : 45 ] We need to look at the details here. And most of the space in this middle scene is given to spoken words, mostly between Naomi and her daughters-in-law, because the love and hidden hand and purpose of God is worked out in our relationships primarily.

And it begins with the first reference to the God of Israel, verse 6. Naomi's heart has remained back in Israel. After 10 years of barrenness and death, she initiates a return to the land with her two daughters-in-law.

She believes, verse 6, the Lord, Yahweh, his personal name, has visited his people and given them food. It's interesting, isn't it? She doesn't look back at the land and say, oh, the weather's changed or, you know, the economic policy has improved and the market's good.

She sees what's happening in terms of the personal action of the personal God. And for the first time, we're introduced to the providence of God. The providence of God.

God, the creator of the world, sustains every creature, every part of this world, large and small, which gives importance and significance to each of our lives.

[ 8 : 54 ] And his hand is active in what we usually think of as just natural, you know, food, rain, things that look like chance and random, they are ordered according to the purposes of God's good providence.

All our free decisions and actions, our joys and our sufferings, all our friendships and love and disappointments are all drawn up into God's hand, usually in a way that's hidden from us.

I just make the point here because, you see, our lives are not controlled by chance or fate, but by the hand of our loving father. And that means that every experience, whether it's good or bad, every individual, every local, national, global event, tragedy or triumph, finds their meaning in the

purposes of God.

And we look at our own lives and sometimes it's bewildering and overwhelming and even devastating. It's still part of God's providence. And God's providence bridges the divide between what we call natural and supernatural, between big, big and small, between spectacular and unusual, between ordinariness and eternity.

And, you know, some Christians love to talk about what's spectacular and unusual as though those things are somehow more spiritually authentic than humdrum reality of daily life.

[ 10 : 22 ] But what Ruth, this book, is here telling us is that what's baffling and thorny and ordinary and mundane is just as much part of God's providence. So the three women move back to Judah.

And as soon as they head out, verse 8, Naomi stops and turns to her daughters-in-law and say, you need to go back to your families in Moab. And halfway through verse 8, she says this.

May the Lord deal kindly with you as you've dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you might find rest each in the house of her husband.

These are the first words of Naomi and they are a prayer to the God of Israel. One writer I read this week says, the prayer is the flip side of the doctrine of providence.

Isn't that lovely? Because you only pray to this God if you believe he's real and he cares and he has the power to answer and that he's active and generous toward you.

[ 11 : 25 ] And Naomi is thinking of what is best for these women. She prays that God would deal with them kindly. It's a very big word in the Bible.

This is the Hebrew word that's usually translated steadfast love. You know a word's important when it takes a bunch of English words to translate it. It's the Hebrew word *hesed* and steadfast love of the Lord which never ceases, which is better than life.

And it is used in situations which are shocking and surprising displays of sheer goodness and love, often in extreme circumstances. It's my favourite one, is when the prostitute Rahab lies to the men of the city to hide the spies and the spies say to her, you have shown *hesed*.

It's completely illegal. It's a creative action of kindness. And it's often spontaneous and extravagant and risky and it's not the normal thing we experience together.

But it's the foundation of God's dealing with us. God overflows with abundant *hesed* toward us. It's his primal reality. It's out of this he shows mercy and grace and extraordinary kindness.

[ 12 : 43 ] *Hesed*, if you like, is love with no exit strategy. And the beautiful thing in this book is not just that God acts with *hesed*, but that Ruth acts with *hesed*.

Come to that. But her two daughters-in-law say to her, no, no, no, we'll go and support you. So again, she presses them verses 11 to 13. She asks the most obvious question, why?

Why are you going to come to me? I've got absolutely nothing humanly to offer you. I can't even provide for myself. If you look at the words in 12 and 13, she says, I am a hopeless, dried up old woman.

At least you have a chance of marrying back in Moab. Git, she says. And in a moment of truthfulness and transparency, verse 13, she says, none of my daughters, it is exceedingly bitter for me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.

Interesting. She doesn't hide her real feelings from God or from a daughter's law. Daughter's in law. And they weep bitter tears. It's wonderful, I think, because she doesn't offer them cliches or platitudes.

[ 13 : 55 ] Her grief at this stage is as real as her faith in God. And like Job, she experiences God as her enemy. It's a terrible tension.

She's looking for God's hand in her circumstances. And we will find that God's answer for Naomi is different than God's answer for Job, even though both of them have to do with fixing their eyes and heart on a coming redeemer.

And the irony is that Naomi does not know that the answer is actually standing right there in front of her in the person of Ruth. We'll come to that.

Orpah, the older of the two daughters-in-law, makes the very sensible decision. It's the only practical, rational decision to go back to Moab as she does. But Ruth does not. So again, Naomi says to her daughter-in-law, Ruth, look, you should go back.

Orpah's done the logical thing. She's gone back to her family and to her gods. And then Ruth speaks for the first time in the most astonishing words, which are usually torn straight out of context and put on a calendar or on a fridge magnet.

[15:01] Verse 16. Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people. Your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there I'll be buried.

May the Lord, this is the word Yahweh, this is the personal name of God. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. And Naomi, she's determined on their go. Something has happened to Ruth. And it can only have happened through the authenticity and truthfulness of Naomi's faith in very difficult circumstances.

Do you find that interesting? That Ruth has come to faith in the true God and she now sees herself no longer as a Moabite but as one of God's people.

[16:02] She takes the name of Israel's God on her lips. She has been converted and she speaks and commits and loves out of her new faith in God.

This is hesed love. It's love with no exit. Where you die, I will die. And Naomi says, my life is over. And Ruth says, no, no, my life is over. Here's a quote from Paul Miller. He says, in order to give Naomi comfort, companionship and food, Ruth gives up friends, family and the possibility of a husband and children.

In fact, her entire future. Ruth embraces hopelessness in order to give Naomi a measure of hope. She out-heseds Naomi.

Death is at the centre of Ruth's love. Hesed seems to be contagious. And part of this book is it beautifully shows how hesed unravels the most hopeless of circumstances and even death itself.

[17:15] And this commitment of Ruth's to Naomi opens the door for redemption, not just for Ruth, but for Naomi and for the coming of Christ. And it is this Christ-like action of this Moabite woman, Ruth, that God uses to bring redemption in this book.

And Naomi can't even see it. So we get to the third section, the final section. I'm so glad you read it, Michelle. Verses 19 to 22. I've called it the return of Naomi and Ruth, or I wanted to call it the invisible daughter-in-law.

I think that has better ring to it, don't you? So they come slouching to Bethlehem, the house of bread. And we realise that grief has physically aged Naomi.

She's physically unrecognisable to the women she grew up with. And they say, is this Naomi? And Naomi fires back, don't call me that.

Don't call me sweetie pie or honey pie. Call me what I am, mara, bitter, sour puss. You see verse 20? I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.

[18:26] Don't call me Naomi, sweetness, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me. Very interesting, isn't it? I think this is more than depression. Somehow Naomi has allowed her grief to become her very identity, so that her name is now bitterness, which I think is understandable.

And yet she's allowed her grief to close her eyes to the reality of God's providence and the woman standing in front of her there. And there are two clues here, two clues for us to the rest of the book, to see the hidden hand of God.

And the first is the last phrase in chapter one. They came to the Bethlehem, the house of bread, at the beginning of the barley harvest. They just so happen to come back.

You'll find that through Ruth. It just so happens. Though she sees the last ten years as a journey from fullness to emptiness, she cannot imagine God ever filling her again or making her a sweet.

But God is not finished in his kindness to her as he is not finished in his kindness to us. And chapter two, as we'll see next week, is all about bread and grain and grain and bread and bread and grain and eating and being satisfied, and there are leftovers running over.

[19:52] And the second little clue we have here is that her daughter, Ruth, sorry, her daughter-in-law, Ruth, is standing right there, completely invisible to her.

Twice we're told in the last verse, 22, that Ruth has come all the way from Moab, but she's travelled an even longer distance spiritually. She's come from darkness to light through the witness of Naomi and her suffering, which means that God is still working through her and God is still working through us, even in our bitterness, even when we have a sense of hopelessness, if we confess our faith in him.

I just love this. I mean, this is how narrative works. It doesn't allow us to sit on the sidelines and stay outside the story, but it draws us in. I mean, you may feel that you're far away from the blessing of

God.

You might feel like your life is being emptied by God, even by the choice of others around you. You may feel like your circumstances are impossible and overwhelming and seemingly hopeless.

Or you may be facing a decision where you need to make a risky choice of love, which is going to be very costly, and you feel, no, no, it'd be much more sensible to be self-protective and take the easy route.

[ 21 : 13 ] You might feel that you're an invisible person. Or you may be struggling with your own bitterness and cynicism, which makes others around you invisible and also makes you brittle, and find you draw little comfort from your own faith in God.

He doesn't seem to be answering your prayers. You can't see how the daily circumstances of your life have anything to do with God's great plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. And I do not want to give away too much of the plot here, but there are four chapters and we're at chapter one.

And this book of Ruth, like every other book in the Old Testament and all the Bible, is about Jesus Christ. And chapters two and three are about redemption and the marriage of Ruth, this lovely guy Boaz.

And in chapter four, a child is born in the little town of Bethlehem, a grandson to Elimelech and Naomi.

And it falls to the women of Bethlehem to tell Naomi the true value of this invisible daughter-in-law. And they say to her, you're not empty, you're full.

[ 22 : 26 ] They say to her, unto you a child is born, unto you a son is given. You are the object of God's love and God's mercy. Look over at chapter four, verse 15 for a moment.

This is lovely stuff. They prophesy about the baby. They say, he shall be to you, Naomi, a restorer of your life, a nourisher of your old age.

For your daughter-in-law who loves you, he is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him. Then Naomi took the child. The child fills her lap, as it were, and he became his nurse.

And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name saying, a son has been born to Naomi. They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse. The father of David.

The great king, the greatest king in the Old Testament. The one God appoints Messiah over all things. And we begin to wonder at the hidden hand of God through all this.

[ 23 : 29 ] The book finishes with the ancestry of the royal Messiah, who is the forefather of Jesus Christ himself. The Moabite outsider, Ruth, becomes the grandmother of the great king David.

And through her faith in God and hewed love to Naomi and Boaz. And when we open the book of the New Testament in Matthew chapter one, what do we find? We find Ruth is named in Jesus' genealogy.

This book is the genesis of Jesus Christ. That's what it's doing here. And we don't see it all, but we see God's hand of providence working in this, working in the famine and the exile, in the decisions of Naomi and of Ruth, to bring salvation, not just to them, but to the whole world.

That through these very individual and very ordinary circumstances of life, God is bringing his Messiah out of the impossibility and insecurity and tragedy and hopelessness of this family, this family, and out of the spiritual swamp of the time of judges.

And it happens through the risky choices of love, that the women make. And what that means is that the ordinary circumstances and real faith of this family are now caught up into the highest purposes of God for his creation, which is exactly what happens to all of us as we become one with Jesus Christ, the true Messiah, as we place our faith and hope in him.

[ 25 : 10 ] We become part of the household of God. We become brothers and sisters of our Redeemer, children of God, our Heavenly Father. And in all our circumstances, no matter how they look, if we are in Jesus Christ, we have a fullness that nothing can take away.

You remember when we looked through Colossians? In Christ, the whole fullness of God dwells bodily. And you have come to fullness in him. And even when we cannot see it, through our suffering, through our bad decisions, through our risky choices of love, the hidden hand of God's providence leads us deeper into the Lord Jesus Christ and somehow in ways we can't see, raises us up into the great purposes of God for salvation to the ends of the earth.

And we trust him to bring that day when all this creation will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.