

Ruth 1 (PM)

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[0 : 00] So Ruth is, I think, one of the most beautiful stories in the whole Bible. Someone described to me last week as theological art, and I think that's right.

It's so carefully and wonderfully written. It's also, it's quite an unusual book in the Bible. It's unusual for a number of reasons.

It's short, it's just four chapters, but it packs a punch. The two main characters are women, which is unusual. There's also no big miracles.

There's no overt acts of God. In fact, you'll notice that if you read through the whole thing, God is hardly mentioned at all. I don't actually, when I've read through it, and I don't actually know if the narrator ever actually says God did this or did that.

Although God's providence is there very clearly. But in the words of the characters, the characters say, God did this or God did that. It's unusual because there are no real sort of scoundrels in the book either.

[1 : 10] There's one or two bad decisions, but there's no real baddies. There's no pharaohs, no pagan priests, no Goliaths, no antagonists. Finally, it's unusual because the great truths of God are seen, played out, playing out not on a grand scale.

Not in battlefields or in palaces or in courthouses with royalty. No, the great truths of God are played out in the life of just a really little family.

Who are just trying to make life work somehow. Just like us. We're just trying to make life work. It's a real gift to us.

It's a relatable book. And what it does is it invites us to look at our own life and reflect on how God is at work in our daily life. In the hard stuff and in the good stuff.

So we'll spend four weeks in Ruth. They're going to be good weeks. B.B. Warfield, but it won't be easy all the time. B.B. Warfield was this old Princeton theologian.

[2 : 19] He said that the Old Testament is like a richly furnished but dimly lit room. It's great, right? He goes on to say, Only when the light is turned on in the person and work of Jesus do the contents become clear.

So as we're going through Ruth, it means we will enjoy the beauty of the story. But we'll also be doing the hard work of asking ourselves, How does this story help us understand Jesus?

Right. Let's quickly talk about context. So where are we in the Bible? Ruth sits between Judges and Samuel. Judges and Samuel. And in a sense, it glues these two books together.

So Ruth, right at the start, sort of time stamps the story. You heard it. In verse 1, it says, In the days when Judges ruled. Okay, what does that mean?

Remember, this comes immediately after Judges. The very last sentence of Judges is helpful to us. And it says this, In those days there was no king in Israel.

[3 : 25] Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. In her own eyes. Spiritually, the context, it's God's people are a mess. They're just doing whatever they want.

It's a dark time. That's how Ruth starts. That's the context. But at the end of Ruth, Ruth has a baby. So I've spoiled it for you, but gets married, has a baby. Okay. And the baby is called Obed.

Now listen to the very last line of Ruth. Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David. So Ruth is the great grandmother of King David.

God's Messiah of the Old Testament. So Ruth ends with a promise of a king. It starts in a mess and ends with the promise of a king.

So it's this perfect little story that links, judges this dark time to the great promises of God in Samuel there. Okay. Now one more thing before we get to the actual story.

[4 : 25] We do have to work a little bit harder on this first week. One more thing. What are the big themes? And very quickly, the big themes. I'll just name two at this point. One big theme is loyalty. God's loyalty to others. God's loyalty to his people. People's loyalty to each other. And the Hebrew word for loyalty is hesed. And I'll be referring to that in the sermon and over the next few weeks. Second big theme, providence, which means it's God's work in the world. As we've said, the providence in Ruth, it's very understated. But it's very real. And we'll be talking about that as well. Okay. Right. Here we go. So just try and mush all that sort of into your head. And now we enter the story. Okay.

Chapter one, Ruth. So it can be, it's probably helpful to break it up into three scenes. We'll call the first scene emigration, with an E. Emigration. So there's a couple, Elimelech and Naomi.

[5 : 25] They've got two kids, Malon and Chilian. Those names mean sickly and annihilation. So you know it's not going to go well for them, right?

They're a little family. They live in Bethlehem. But there's a famine. And the dad decides to take the family to live in Moab, which is a strange thing to do.

Because they're turning away from the one place on planet Earth that God says, this is the place for you that I have given you. This is where I want you to live.

There's one place. Right here it is. This is in the Old Testament, right? The family's going to leave that promised land. And they're going to go to Moab. And Moab is enemy territory. Moab is a terrible place.

They have pagan priests that sacrifice children. It's not a place they should go. But there wasn't a famine in Moab. And so as often as the case, pragmatism wins out over obedient faith.

[6 : 27] We could talk about that a bit, but we're going to keep moving. Okay. So in verse 3, the husband dies. This is terrible for Naomi, but she still has her two sons.

The sons marry local girls, Orpah and Ruth, and settle in for 10 years. Then the two sons die. There's no children. It's not explained.

So now it's just Naomi and her two daughters-in-law. So Naomi is with the daughters-in-law living in a pagan city. All the male members of the family are gone. And in that culture, in that time, that's a very desperate situation.

So scene 1, it's looking very bleak for Naomi. Scene 2, we'll call the decision. That's sort of verses 6 to 18-ish there. So Naomi hears that things are going better in Bethlehem.

So she decides to go back and she tells her daughter-in-laws to stay in Moab. Verse 8, she says this. Naomi said to her daughters-in-laws, Go, return each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you.

[7 : 32] That kindly word's a great word. That's the hesed word. That means extraordinary loyalty. So Naomi gives a bit of a sending-off speech to her daughters-in-law, and then a little blessing, saying, Off you go.

I know it's a smart thing to do. Go back to where you were raised, and I hope that God is super kind to you. But Orpah and Ruth refuse to leave her, and Naomi says, It's crazy.

It is crazy to stay with me. It's ridiculous to stay with me. I'm not going to have any more children. And even if I did, would they be boys? We don't know. And would you wait 20 years for them to grow up and then marry them?

She's playing out this ridiculous scenario. She goes, No, don't stay with me. Do the sensible thing, she says. Do the sensible thing and go back to Moab. So, verse 14, Orpah kisses her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

It's a goodbye kiss from Orpah, but Ruth is not going anywhere. And this clung word, again, it's a rich passage. This clung word in Hebrew, this is not, I'm going to give you a hug.

[8 : 36] Oh, it's hard, but I'm going to stick around for a little while. It's not. In the Bible, that clung word is actually a word used in relation to marriage. In Genesis 2, 24, here's how the Bible describes what happens in a marriage.

Genesis 2, 24. Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife. A hold fast word is the Hebrew word that's translated clung to here.

All that to say, Ruth is making this huge commitment here to stick with Naomi. And listen to the words that she says. She says this, For where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people. Your God, my God. That's the center of it. Where you die, I will die and be buried there. May the Lord do so to me and more. Also, if anything but death parts me from

you.

So, did you notice there? In the guts of this incredible commitment she makes, is a commitment to share Naomi's God. Your God will be my God.

[9 : 40] And that's why she makes the commitment. See, these words don't just represent this sort of, you know, wonderful affection she has for her mother-in-law. They actually reflect a conversion that has happened in Ruth's life.

Naomi says, do the sensible thing, Ruth. Return to Moab. And Ruth says, no. I can't go back. And the reason I can't go back is because I'm no longer what I once was.

I am no longer trusting in the gods that my sister-in-law has returned to. So, don't ask me to leave you. I'm going where you're going because your God is my God.

See, it's this conversion that leads to this amazing hesed loyalty to stick with Naomi because she's sticking with Naomi's God.

That's the second scene. So, scene one, emigration. It's looking terrible for Naomi. Scene two, the decision. Ruth clings to Naomi and heads to Bethlehem.

[10 : 45] Now, scene three, very short, we'll call it a homecoming, verses 19 to 22. So, Naomi returns to her old home with Ruth. And there's a bit of a stir. Everyone says, hey, Naomi, Naomi.

Oh, Naomi. So good to see you, Naomi. She goes, don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara. Mara means bitter. It's how she feels. She says, I left here full.

I left here with this real sense of security. We're doing the right thing. This is a good decision. And I've returned to my home empty. Right at the end of this chapter, the last little phrase is this little, little signpost that things are going to turn around.

And the signpost says, it's the beginning of the barley harvest. Okay. There you go. That's the story. That's the story. So far, that's the story.

What I want to do is I want to round this out by just reflecting on some of the big themes. Now, remember I said the big themes are loyalty and providence.

[11 : 52] But I want to look at those through the lens of suffering because that's like a big thing in this first chapter. Next week, we're going to look at it through the lens of, well, things start to turn around and go a bit better.

But this week, it's suffering. So here's a question for you. Here's a good, like, apologetic question. Is the original family, mum, dad, two kids, are they, you know, and all the dudes died, right?

Were they punished? Was that punishment for leaving Bethlehem and settling in Moab? It's a good question. And I think it's tempting to think it. But the Bible teaches us we cannot draw a simple line between sin and punishment.

The Bible says there's not a linear one-to-one relationship between those things in daily life. God is too big. He is too majestic to reduce his activity in the world and in our life to, like, an equation like that.

Like, you know, bad things happen to bad people. It doesn't always work like that. Okay, next question. What about suffering and God's providence? You know, God works in the world.

[13 : 07] He's doing stuff in the world. But I'm suffering. I'm struggling. Terrible things have happened to me. It's easy to believe that God is in control when things are going well, right? But when disaster strikes, that makes it a little bit harder to believe that God is still working, that he's still involved.

We said at the start that the narrator doesn't, I don't think, correct me if I'm wrong, but it doesn't look like the narrator ever says, God did this. And God did that.

The providence in this book is very understated. Why? A very good reason. The reason is this. Because the writer wants to stress that God's control is continuous in our life.

But mostly hidden. But continuous. And I think that's a very good way to think about it. Because otherwise we'll fall into the trap of thinking, you know, God does something really amazing in our life.

And then he kind of disappears for a couple of years. And then he does something really amazing. Like we get this great job. Or, you know, maybe if it's your desire to get married, you might meet some really great person.

[14 : 13] It's like, God's an amazing thing. And then he disappears for years. That's just not how it works. God is always there.

He is always working. Even in your most darkest moments. He is always in control. It's just, it's mostly hidden. And what God does with his sovereignty, he weaves together our pain and our poor decisions.

And he weaves those together to work out his purposes in the world. And as a reminder, his big purpose is to make Jesus known.

And that's really important, right? God's providence is not about making your life more comfortable. It's laser focused on Jesus. Think about this terrible decision to go to Moab.

What came out of that? Out of that bad decision? Well, God used that to bring Ruth to faith. And Ruth became the great grandmother of King David.

[15 : 22] And that family line continues all the way to Jesus. And she's named in his genealogy. Another way to think about it is this. This is from a slightly different angle, but in terms of suffering and providence and what God is doing.

Your suffering might not just be about you. The purpose of your suffering might not just be about you. And it might not even just be about you and Jesus.

What could God be doing with your pain in the lives of other people? We don't know. We don't know.

But it could be helping others grow deeper in their faith in Christ. Finally, final question here. Suffering and hesed.

So I've talked about, was it punishment? No. Can't make that equation that simple. What about suffering and providence? God is working at his purposes silently and quietly in the world all the time.

[16 : 30] What about suffering and hesed though? Loyalty. That's what we translated. That's how I described it earlier on. But it's a bit more meatier than that. Sometimes scholars translate it covenant love.

And I think that's a bit clinical. Hesed is a shocking display of goodness. Hesed is a shocking display of love. It is love that is exceptional and surprising.

It's love that does not do what is expected. Like Ruth going back to Bethlehem with Naomi. Going back to a culture she doesn't understand. To a place that she doesn't know. She's this random, foreign, like enemy basically to the people of God.

That's how they would have thought of her. Love. It's love that doesn't do what is expected. It's love that ignores what is sensible. You might remember the story of Rahab, the prostitute.

Her story is in Joshua. She's fantastic, right? She was this prostitute. She worked in Jericho. God's people sent their spies into Jericho. And she hid them.

[17 : 33] Because she trusted in their God. So when the authorities came, they were like, where's the spies? Where's the spies? Where's the spies? She's like, well, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know what spies. I don't know what you're talking about. She lies to them.

She's a criminal according to the authorities in Jericho. But the Bible describes what she did as hesed loyalty. It's this uncoerced act of surprising love and kindness.

She did hesed. And we have a number of incredible models of that hesed love in our passage. The clearest example is Ruth herself. So Naomi paints this very bleak picture of her future.

And Ruth takes her hand and is willing to walk into it with her. She does hesed. It's astonishing. And that hesed is a picture of the kind of loyalty that God has for you.

It's free. It's spontaneous. It's overwhelming. It's hard to get your head around. And you know what? But sometimes that hesed love looks like suffering.

[18 : 43] Sometimes it looks like God removing all of your props. It looks like God removing the supports in your life. Because sometimes God will empty you to bring us back to him.

Sometimes that's what hesed love from God looks like. And it's the gospel paradox, isn't it? Death, the way to life. Death, the way to life. So tonight I'm going to finish up here.

Tonight we've talked about suffering. We've talked about the providence of God. God's work in the world mostly hidden but continuous. And we've talked about God's incredible loyalty to you.

So let me finish with this. And I felt compelled to say this when I was preparing. I don't know who needs to hear this but don't give up on Jesus if you're on the edge.

Do not give up on Jesus. He has you. Jesus knows what he is doing with your life. He hasn't gone anywhere. And he will be loyal to you.

[19 : 49] And he will be loyal to you even when you are not loyal to him. And he will do that because of what Jesus has done on the cross. Folks, let's stand together.
We're going to sing this hymn together. You can sing or if you like you can use this time to pray.