

# Lamentation Journey of Faith

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[ 0 : 00 ] You have just heard the first of four chapters in what is called the greatest short story in the history of the world. Now, titles like that raise one's doubts, but only because in order to be that, you would have to have read all the short stories in the history of the world.

And then you've had to persuade somebody else to read them. And then a third person to affirm the judgment of the first two as to whether they were correct in saying, this is the greatest story in the history of the world, but at least it is a candidate for that high position.

And that's the story of Ruth. And it's a wonderful, wonderful story, and you need to read it over, and by reading it over to become very familiar with the good lady whose story it tells.

I am fully aware that I am confronting in this congregation a few, well, perhaps a couple of hundred personal stories.

Each of you has a personal story. And one of the things that I very much regret is that I am allowed to stand up here and preach without knowing what your story is.

[ 1 : 32 ] But we can't take the time for you to all tell us what your story is. So what I'm doing is telling you the story of Ruth and seeing if in some way this helps you to identify and perhaps put together in a different way the story of your life.

You know, if you were to take all the facts and give it to somebody like Leo Tolstoy or Margaret Atwood, they could probably take the content of your life and make it a bestseller.

I mean, I quite believe that because it's an amazing fact. In fact, if we could get at it and get at all the circumstances of each of your individual lives, you have to think about a story.

It has a beginning, and you have a beginning. It has an ending, and you, I assure you, will most certainly have an ending. You may not have realized that yet, but I know about it.

It often begins with once upon a time, and your life is lived in such a moment in time.

[ 3 : 00 ] In the vast panorama of the history of the world, there is once upon a time in which you happen to exist. There are factors in your life of deprivation.

The umbrella of tragedy covers many lives. There is, no doubt, a love story, maybe love-fulfilled or unrequited love.

That's part of your story, and a continuing part of it that you perhaps won't let on about. The story is often accompanied by hopes and failures, dreams and disasters.

There is, I might say, in all of you, deep, dark secrets at the center of your life. Secrets, you'd probably be quite happy to leave out of the story, or at least not tell them until after the story ends.

Yours is probably a story that if you were to pick it up in a used bookstore, and in the format of a slightly worn pocketbook, you might read halfway through it before you recognized who the story was about, because we don't think about our story that much.

[ 4 : 37 ] Well, I, to my great surprise, find myself an old man with a failing memory, and so that within the span of my memory, it is difficult to go beyond the time between last week and today.

We all generally have somebody write for us an obituary, which is as close as most of us will ever get to having our story written, which generally is just a mask to put over the true story.

The true story can only be written by someone who knows you, somebody who loves you, somebody whom you understand, and someone who is able to fit you in to the vast tapestry of human history.

It is most likely that the true story of your life will not be written. You might begin your autobiography, but the simple fact is that you will not be able to tell the story of where it ends, nor probably to think about what it means.

Part of such a story needs to be included, and probably large parts of it need to be trashed.

[ 6 : 10 ] The great benefit, then, of reading the Bible is that when you read about the prodigal son, you might be led to conclude, Hey, that's me.

Or perhaps you will read about his older brother, and you might become aware of your own story in his story. If you are the chief executive officer of a large corporation, you might see yourself caught in the jam that Pilate found himself in, and find yourself saying, What is truth?

That afflicts a great many chief executive officers in our world. A great many others as well. The world may have turned against you, and you suddenly discover in the story of Job some of the reality of your own life.

If you are young and lusty as an eagle, you may find yourself caught in an adulterous relationship, like King David.

And if you trace King David's story through the story of his adultery, you might learn a lot. Or you might be sitting in a pub on a Saturday night, talking with a group of your peers, and you might suddenly hear a rooster crow.

[ 8 : 03 ] And then you will discover, in the course of the conversation, that you, like Peter, have denied your relationship to Jesus Christ.

Again, you might be in the condition of that agonized parent who, turning to Jesus, said, Come down, ere my child die.

All those could be parts of your story. And most of those stories would give some light to your understanding your story, whatever it may be.

So you see, you are to make friends of David and Peter, the woman of Samaria, Joseph, Daniel, John the Baptist, and as you read their life story, you may be enabled to put together your life story. Many of you, I don't know. And many of you, I know, don't want to be known. And many of you are busy creating a fantasy in which you can hide from the reality of your own life.

[ 9 : 41 ] Such a fantasy not only serves to deceive others, but to deceive yourself. So coming to church tonight, you have the great and high privilege of confronting the one.

This affects your story. You are to confront the one as you already have in prayer. The one unto whom your heart is an open book, your desires, both bad and good, are completely known.

The dark secrets and your secret hopes and longings are all carefully noted. noted. So, for the purpose of bringing you into contact with the wonder and direction of your own life, I'm going to the Bible to tell you the story of a beautiful young woman whose life, I hope, will put you in closer touch with your own life story.

It is one of the Jewish commentaries that tells us that Ruth was a very beautiful woman. Culturally, you and I are conditioned to think of female beauty in different ways.

There are references in Ruth that suggest that she was beautiful in the way that the beautiful Nefertiti, the Egyptian queen, was.

[ 11 : 40 ] You know, the picture of her with the long, long neck? It's a, there's an indication among the scholars who study the book of Ruth to suggest that that was the kind of beauty that was respected in Ruth and in her time.

There are blissful ladies of Rubens' paintings who are considered beautiful ladies. Then there are the exquisitely beautiful ladies of perfume ads in contemporary magazines.

There is, interestingly enough, a description of a beautiful woman by her husband. And of her, he says, many women have done excellently, but you surpassed them all.

Charm is deceitful, beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

And then the New Testament gives a description of a beautiful woman and says to her, do not let your adorning be external.

[ 13 : 11 ] Primary concern, he is here, for the inward adorning of your life, not the external, the braiding of your hair, the wearing of gold, the putting on of clothing, but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.

That, if you look it up in 1 Peter 3, you'll find it's in a slightly different context than you might hear it now, but you can deal with that problem.

One of the most beautiful pictures of Ruth in all of English literature is in the poem An Ode to a Nightingale.

And I would be very grateful if anybody knows it by heart, if you'd come up and say it to us. Any volunteers? Keats' Ode to a Nightingale.

But what he imagines is that he sees himself at night, which is when the nightingale sings.

[ 14 : 38 ] And how many of you ever heard a nightingale? None of you? Somebody from England must have heard one. We don't have them here, but it's apparently a very beautiful song that's sung in the night.

Good. If you want to do an imitation, I am. All right. Well, and Keats is standing in the night, and he hears this lovely song of this bird.

And he imagines that Ruth stood alone amidst the alien corn and heard just such a song. So he identifies himself with Ruth in suggesting that what was his experience of exquisite beauty was also hers.

David was a professor of English literature at Ottawa University and who I might say once came to St.

[ 16 : 01 ] John Shaughnessy to find himself a bride. He's written a wonderful book called A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature.

It's a magnificent and large tome. He says in this book of Ruth, of the book of Ruth, that it is cited by Milton, by William Blake, by Dante, by Whittier, and Lord Byron, and is illustrated in the paintings of Rembrandt, Poussin, D.H.

Lawrence, Delacroix, Ruth is a lady well worth getting to know. It would be a great thing if one of you who works at a library or something could get a slide and we could show some of these pictures of Ruth one night in the course of the series, but that may be a project that one of you would take on.

In the first chapter of the book, which sets the background of the story, and I'm talking primarily about the first chapter tonight, and subsequent chapters, will be dealt with on subsequent nights. the story is of famine coming to Bethlehem, and Bethlehem means the house of bread, and all the bread was gone in Bethlehem because of the famine.

[ 17 : 52 ] And so Elimelech and his wife Naomi take their two sons and go to what was a relatively distant land.

And while they are there, you've heard this story read to you tonight, while they were there, the two sons married two Moabite women, one of which was Ruth, and one of which was Orpah. and subsequently the two sons died, and Elimelech died, and there was left Orpah and Ruth and Naomi stranded without any male member of their family in Moab, which was an alien country as far as the Bethlehemites were concerned.

So, this is what it says about Ruth. Now, these are the characteristics of her. Listen to this, this listing. She was a Moabite.

She married outside her ethnic group. She was apparently barren and bore no child.

[ 19 : 20 ] She was widowed while still a very young woman. She had changed her local god for the god of the Hebrews.

She abandoned her immediate family for the family of her husband. She abandoned her culture for an alien culture where she would feel alienated.

she became a sojourner. A sojourner is one whose home is not down here.

In other words, they have no place where they belong. You might say that she made a covenant with her husband in marriage.

She discovered a god who made covenants with his people. And she in the first chapter makes a covenant with her mother-in-law.

[ 20 : 34 ] most of all, she made what is the sort of highlight of the whole book, a covenant statement which others have tried to live out for centuries.

It's been said on millions of occasions between millions of people. But this instance of it was Naomi talking to her, sorry, Ruth talking to her mother-in-law when she said, as Joella read for us, do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.

Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people.

Your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.

And may the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.

[ 21 : 54 ] me. So, you must read this book because it's you must read it in order to come to terms with that covenant and the implications of it.

So, what happens then is this. She makes this covenant and it's partly because I think she made a covenant with her husband in marriage.

She came to know the God of her husband who is the covenant making God and she abandoned the capricious God of her own people whose name was Chemosh.

She then at the point in which she could go back to her own culture where she could go back to her own home and go back to her own family she decided that she would rather go with her mother-in-law and so she made this covenant commitment to her mother-in-law.

Now, you see, what Christian faith is about is a covenant. What you are here for tonight as a Christian believer is to renew the covenant that you have made as a Christian.

[ 24 : 11 ] What you're here for her is in a very real way to turn to Jesus Christ and in the midst of many tensions and stresses in your life to say, where you go, I will go.

Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God.

where you die, I will die. And things change at that point because he by his death and we by our death in Christ share with him not a burial place but the resurrection.

This is, this is the covenant. Now, I'm almost done. Let me explain to you this. Osama bin Laden apparently looked at Western civilization and saw it as being totally decadent and he was convinced that that had been the condition of the Soviet Union and by the uprising in Afghanistan as it had begun to affect parts of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union suddenly collapsed like a pack of cards. and Osama bin was convinced that Western civilization was so decadent that if anybody even gave it a little push, it too will collapse like a deck of cards.

[ 26 : 29 ] well, thus far that's not proved true, but that's the way he thinks of it and he sees our moral decadence as being the evidence of our total weakness and that we have to return to something like justice.

You see, he thinks of the Western world as regarding freedom as freedom to morally do whatever pleases you.

That's what freedom is. And as we become more sophisticated as a society, we indulge more in the freedoms of moral lassitude.

Do whatever we like. You see, that's breaking away from the core idea that at the center of your life, there is a covenant in which you make a commitment.

Osama bin Laden says Islam regards freedom as being an attribute of justice.

[ 28 : 06 ] Where there is justice, there is freedom. And so you can see why he is so keen to impose justice.

St. Paul said, like Osama bin Laden, do not use your freedom as an occasion for the flesh.

Don't use your freedom for the exercise of moral decadence. And the reason being that the people of God have at the heart of their community is a focus of commitment.

And that focus of commitment is in Jesus Christ, in his death, and in his resurrection.

So that what you are doing by coming here tonight is to establish again, to renew, and perhaps it might be for the first time, I don't know, but to establish anew the central commitment of your life to the person of Jesus Christ.

[ 29 : 32 ] Now you will hear in the next two or three Sunday nights, you'll hear the rest of the story of Ruth. and you will see that having nothing but that commitment, how her life unfolded in wonderful evidence of the providence and care of God, how her amazing story developed.

And so at the heart of you and your story must be the definition of a commitment that you have made, the most serious commitment of your life.

And that commitment will precede the working out of the chapters of the story of your life as you trace the impact of having made that commitment and followed that commitment through your life.

I think we live in a world where people suspect that only a free human being, a free human being is one that makes no commitments.

They shack up with no commitments. They live their lives with no commitments. But the story of your life, like the story of Ruth, is largely determined by the central commitment that you make.

[ 31 : 27 ] and if you are a Christian or desire to be, and the central commitment of your life is to Jesus Christ and the service of Holy Communion which we are about to take part in is the renewal and reaffirmation of the commitment you have made.

May God bless you. Amen.