

Ruth "The Loving Weaver"

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Date: 24 June 2018

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[0 : 01] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us. We had a great week at VBS.

It was so much fun to get to talk about God's Word, talk about trusting God with our kids. And we're going to keep talking about that this morning. They learned lots of great Bible stories this week. We're going to talk about a great story this morning. It's one of my favorite stories in all of God's Word. It's the story of Ruth. We're going to look at the whole book.

It's not a long book, so we'll make it through. And we're going to talk through that story as we go. It might be helpful for you to have your Bible open. It's toward the beginning. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, right before all the first and seconds.

If you get a Bible out of the pew in front of you, it's on page 222. Or on your phone, it's page Ruth.

[1 : 05] You can just type Ruth in, I think, is how that works. It's really easy. But let's pray together, and then we'll look at God's Word. Father, thank you for being faithful to us.

Thank you for meeting with us even this morning. Now, as we open your Word, might we hear your voice clearly? That's what we need. Might we know your heart more deeply as we look at your Word?

Would you speak to us, Holy Spirit, that we might hear and know and follow? In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. The book of Ruth does, of course, feature a woman named Ruth and her story. But the first person on stage, as the curtain opens, the last one on the stage as the curtain closes is a woman named Naomi.

And the story begins for Naomi in very mournful tones. In the days when the judges ruled.

[2 : 19] Now, many of God's people in those days when the judges ruled were wandering from God, doing whatever they wanted. And sure enough, as we look at the beginning of Ruth facing famine, Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, wander away from God's promised land.

And whenever that happens in the story, whenever God's people leave the land that He's taken them to without a direct command from Him, it's not good news.

It's a bad sign. Sure enough, as the story goes, just a little while later, Elimelech dies. And then the two boys, Malon and Chilion, marry Moabite women.

But then those boys both die. And so we get to verse 5, and it tells us about the woman who has started the story here on stage.

Where does she find herself? The woman, Naomi, was left without her two sons and her husband. Tragic, right?

[3 : 33] As you might imagine, there's a lot of weeping in the first chapter. Naomi is faced with this terrible suffering, this deep grief, widowed, childless, isolated, and away from friends and family and community.

Many of us know those feelings, don't we? When we were in seminary, Christy and I were so excited to find out we were expecting our first child.

We'd been praying for this. We were overjoyed. And then a few weeks later, we were equally devastated to find out that we'd suffered a miscarriage.

And we were crushed. What's happening? What do we do? We'd never walked through this before. The loss of a child and the joy and the hope that comes with children is so painful.

Others of you share this particular grief with us, with Naomi. Naomi, all of us have suffered pain and grief in one way or another, haven't we?

[4 : 51] And we can imagine at least a bit as we put ourselves in Naomi's shoes what she must have been feeling here in this situation. Tearful, weeping over and over.

I don't know what has caused all of your tears, but we've cried them, haven't we? We've been there. It could be you've prayed and prayed and still lost a child.

Maybe you've heard the word cancer and felt the fog and the darkness just kind of move in and seem to settle over you. Maybe you've tried to love and forgive and to do everything God tells you to do and you've still found yourself in the midst of a painful divorce.

And it's hurt. In the darkness or pain of any of these situations, many others, it's easy to look around and conclude what Naomi concludes here.

Listen to what she tells her friends when she gets home to Bethlehem, verse 19. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them and the women said, Is this Naomi?

[6 : 11] And she said to them, Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty.

Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me? God is against me.

The tragedy and suffering in her life has led her to that conclusion, hasn't it? His presence seems distant. His promises seem false.

His character seems undesirable. Can you blame her? Have you felt that way too?

I've trusted you. God, I've tried to follow you. I've wanted to hold on to hope, but... And so what happens in Naomi's story through the rest of the book of Ruth is that God demonstrates that despite the very understandable feeling that God is against her, quite the opposite is actually true.

[7 : 32] God is actually full of faithful love. God is still with Naomi. His character is trustworthy, and His promises are greater than she could even imagine and for her.

But right now, she's bitter. Don't even call me Naomi. It means pleasant. Call me Mara.

It means bitter. That's where she is. And yet, even in the midst of her bitterness, there's already another name through which God is giving a glimpse of His faithful love to Naomi.

It's Ruth, which means comfort. By all accounts, Naomi should have come home to Bethlehem completely alone.

But something amazing, unexpected, startling to God's people reading this has happened in the heart of this Gentile woman. It's not merely that she deeply loves her mother-in-law, which many cite as one of the top Old Testament miracles through the whole thing.

[8 : 51] It's not true. But more than just loving her mother-in-law, she loves Yahweh, the God of Israel.

She's willing to follow Him into what is a seemingly hopeless future. What's ahead of her back there? There's nothing. She's got a family probably back home, and she could have stayed there. But she goes with Naomi back to Bethlehem. Naomi understands how unreasonable this decision is. She tells Ruth the only wise thing is for Ruth to remain in Moab.

And the other daughter-in-law does that. But Ruth clung to her, verse 14, and says, verse 16, Do not urge me, Naomi, 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 I will be buried.

[10 : 00] May the Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts me from you. Isn't that beautiful? One of the Bible's great statements of loyalty, of faithful love.

In the mouth of Ruth. The words indicate, even better than we can translate them, a profound faith in Israel's God. And her actions, Ruth's actions, the way she treats Naomi, demonstrate a profound covenant commitment.

Like the God of the covenant who sticks with His people no matter what, Ruth will not let go of Naomi. Naomi, comfort is returning with Naomi to the promised land and the God of the promise. But as she comes back, reconnects with her friends, the pain of the suffering, the story she has to tell, is too much.

The shouting of her grief in her heart is still too loud for Naomi to hear comfort. God still seems against her. In any case, Naomi and Ruth settle back into Bethlehem with pretty dim prospects, right?

[11 : 23] Think about it for a minute. No land. No man to provide and harvest the field. No income source for either of them.

But God is about to show His faithful love to them, this time through Boaz. Boaz enters this story because Ruth goes looking for favor, the word means grace, from someone, gleaming in

someone's field.

And she just so happens, chapter 2, verse 3, to end up in a field belonging to Boaz. Now, it's important to understand what's going on to know what gleaning was in ancient Israel.

Gleaning is something that God provides for and establishes in His law that He gives to His people in order to provide for the widow, for the poor, for the foreigner.

What it is, is when you harvest your field, God says, you're to leave bits around the edges. That these who don't have can come and gather for themselves, glean, gather these extra portions for themselves.

[12 : 39] God's loving law is designed specifically to provide for the material needs of those on the margins of society like Ruth and Naomi.

And Boaz well represents the heart of his God by meeting her, speaking to the men working in the field to provide protection for her, and then telling them to make sure she gets extra, all that she needs.

Drop some extra bits behind you when she's nearby. Leave some more. Let her go wherever she wants. The heart was not just, well, see how much you have to leave on the edge. The heart of God's law was, Boaz knew it, care for those like this.

Provide for them. And Boaz demonstrates that, doesn't he? Listen to what he tells Ruth when she comes and asks and has been gleaning in his land.

She says, why? Why are you being so nice to me? My translation. Boaz answered her, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me.

[13 : 46] How you left your father and mother in your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. She doesn't know what this people and their God are like. The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Boaz says, I've seen you demonstrate faithful love like Yahweh's, like our God's. And I'm now going to show it to you as well.

This is what it's like to be under his wings. Boaz says, don't miss this, Ruth. I want you to know what it's like to live under Yahweh's good care.

In fact, as you read through the story, he sends her home with barley more than once. And the amounts of barley she goes home with are intentionally laughable. The people in that day would have known how much it was, and it would have been hard to imagine Ruth carrying them.

She might have struggled under the weight of so much barley. You never came home from gleaning with barley like that. But Boaz insists in chapter 3, when he's loading Ruth up with barley again, he says, you must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.

[15 : 02] What's happening? What's God doing? God is showing Naomi that she is empty, as she said, in order that he may fill her.

That's the kind of faithful love he has. We dare not minimize her emptiness. But we dare not overlook God's full provision, as he has faithfully demonstrated his loving care for her.

And she actually begins to hear it and see it. She doesn't miss it entirely this time. Verse 20 of chapter 2, she says to Ruth, when she comes back with all this barley, may he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.

His, Yahweh's, faithful love has not left her empty or alone. But at this point in the story, we've got to ask, are Ruth and Naomi just going to survive?

Eking by on the gleanings they can get and some occasional generosity from the guy who owns the field, God has an even greater provision for them.

[16 : 14] Relational on top of the material provision. Again through Boaz. Again through the loving nature of God's law that Boaz embraces from his heart.

Now I need to say this, Ruth chapter 3 is not dating advice. I have three young daughters, and I would never encourage any of them to find a husband through the methods used in Ruth chapter 3. That's not the point of Ruth 3, okay? I want them to listen carefully to that. But much of what develops as you read through Ruth 3 is connected to a part of God's law that provides for something called a kinsman redeemer.

What does that mean? Basically, it's more than this, but here's the essence of it. This idea that God has designed of a kinsman redeemer is for someone to bring help to a relative who's about to lose his land, which is a huge deal, right?

Someone who needs an heir. Someone who's died and left a widow uncared for. And in this case, all of these apply, don't they?

[17:27] And Naomi knows it. She knows what her only chance is to live in this land. She knows Boaz is one of those relatives who could redeem them, and so she concocts a plan.

That's what chapter 3 is having going on. She's sending Ruth back to Boaz, anxiously hoping that maybe this would work out. It's a poignant scene in chapter 3.

Ruth sneaks up on a sleeping Boaz, lies down at his feet. Verse 8, Doesn't happen every day. He said, It's dark. She answered, It's that word for that part of God's law we were just talking about. And he said, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first, and that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear.

[18:32] I will do for you all that you ask. For all my fellow townsmen know that you're a worthy woman, and now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet, there is a redeemer nearer than I.

Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you good, let him do it. But if he's not willing to redeem you, then as the Lord lives, I will redeem you. Rest.

Lie down until morning. He reassures her again, right? But Boaz is committed to following God's law in this matter.

He finds the man who is the closer relative, and it looks like maybe this sweet romance between Ruth and Boaz is not going to work out after all. There's another guy, and this guy is very interested in taking on the responsibility of the kinsman redeemer.

The whole conversation exchange at the beginning of chapter 4, they take sandals off, and they strike deals with each other. Primarily, what it's highlighting is the costliness of Boaz's redemption.

[19:40] The other guy is interested, but he decides he can't afford to take on the land and two widows. He backs down, and Boaz steps up.

He will marry this Moabite widow. He will continue to provide for Ruth and Naomi. He will see to it that they experience faithful love.

So Boaz and Ruth get married. Soon they have a son. Naomi's family line will continue. The boy that she holds in her arms and sweetly that she gets to help raise and care for is clearly a gift from God.

But he doesn't erase the pain of the boys Naomi lost, but he does remind her that God has not abandoned her in that pain. Listen to what good friends Naomi has who help her realize that important truth.

Chapter 4, verse 14, Do you have friends like that in your life?

[21:09] Friends who listen to your lament without judgment as far as we can tell? And who also rejoice with you in God's faithful love and help you see it when you struggle?

God has not left you, Naomi. He will restore you in your old age. Remember Ruth? What a gift. And now this boy, God will redeem.

Don't we all need friends in the body of Christ to speak into our pain and remind us that God's love is real? Shouldn't we all be such friends?

It's not perhaps the main point of the book of Ruth, but can we just stop and realize what a great privilege it is that God would allow us to be demonstrations of instruments of His faithful love to others who are hurting?

Ladies, I think this story in particular reminds us that God has specifically gifted many of you with the ability to reflect His image and His character in doing this well.

[22:24] I'm so grateful for that. Ruth reflects God's faithful love. Boaz reflects God's faithful love.

Naomi's friends, the women of the town, reflect God's faithful love. We see the faithful love of God demonstrated by persistent presence in the midst of pain.

Ruth wasn't going anywhere. She wasn't going to let Naomi weep alone, was she? See it through practical help at the point of need.

Boaz wasn't going to let a widow remain empty when he had any power to care for her. We see it by words of hope that point others to God.

Naomi's friends weren't going to let her miss God's faithful love in her life. Who needs you to love them like that? That's part of why we're gathering tomorrow night, to talk together about grief.

[23:28] Because it's so easy to grieve alone and we need each other. It's a big part of what we get to do day by day as we share life together in small groups throughout the year.

Because our culture pushes us toward individualism and isolation and we need each other to experience the faithful love of God through the presence and the help and the encouragement of His people.

Christi and I needed that when we suffered the miscarriage. And many brothers and sisters in that seminary community came and cried with us and cared for us when we struggled through grieving together, didn't know how to handle it, needed help.

And it was such a gift to us. Christi and I have needed that here more recently in the midst of anxiety and fear. And so many of you have loved us so well, shown us Jesus.

Thank you. Who needs you to cry with them? Who needs a meal, a babysitter, a surprise gift? [24 : 38] Who needs you to point them to God's faithful love in their lives so they don't miss Him or forget that He really is for them despite all the evidence to the contrary that they see?

One of my favorite pictures of God working in our lives during hard times is a picture of God weaving a beautiful tapestry together with both light and dark colors, joyful and sorrowful times. On this side of heaven, though, we stand behind the tapestry and usually see only the knotted ends, the frayed edges of what God is doing.

If we could just get on the other side of the tapestry, we could see God doing something beautiful. But that's not our place. We live on the underside with painful circumstances where God's purposes are unclear.

Here's an example where you look on the right and you see this beautiful picture of the repentance of the prodigal son. And then on the left, the backside of this tapestry, you see all these strands and it's actually kind of confusing.

[25 : 57] If you didn't have the picture on the right, you wouldn't really know what you were looking at, would you? If you're just looking at the left side, if you're just standing behind the tapestry, you might well be confused or discouraged.

This image of two sides of a tapestry comes from a poem of unknown origin popularized by Corrie Ten Boom. Let me share it with you. My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me. I cannot choose the colors. He worketh steadily. Oft times he weaveth sorrow. And I in foolish pride forget he sees the upper and I the underside.

Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why. The dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skillful hand as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern he has planned.

He knows. He loves. He cares. Yeah. That's the message, I think, to Naomi.

[27 : 10] Over and over. And to us, I know. I love. I care. He knows. He loves.

He cares. Nothing this truth can dim. He gives his very best to those who leave the choice with him. God is the loving weaver in all of our stories.

Always faithfully working even when we can't see what he's doing. Maybe in your story you're seeing a lot of knotted ends and frayed edges from where you sit right now.

It's often where we find ourselves. God often doesn't give us a glimpse at the front side. Rather, he gives us a glimpse of himself, like what you get this morning in his word.

Himself weaving away with faithful love for us. Notice this one last glorious time for Naomi. Naomi couldn't possibly see what God was up to, where he was taking her and her story.

[28 : 20] In fact, she never knows in this life the full outworking of his gracious, glorious purposes through all of this. Ruth's son, whom Naomi cares for, is Obed.

He was the father of Jesse, the father of King David. That's how Ruth ends. Salmon fathered Boaz. Boaz fathered Obed. Obed fathered Jesse. And Jesse fathered David. David. At the time Ruth is written, the greatest Israelite you could have claimed in your family tree.

And then we know now, on this side of things, that eventually, in that family line, would come Jesus himself.

From an empty, bitter widow, from a Gentile daughter-in-law who desperately needed a Redeemer, comes the great Redeemer.

[29 : 26] See, God works to meet our needs even beyond what we realize we need, doesn't he? Naomi knows that she desperately needs a Kinsman Redeemer.

She was utterly desperate for Boaz to come through. But actually, she needed much more than that. God used the first one, Boaz, to bring the Kinsman Redeemer Naomi really needed, who would pay an even costlier price to provide for her forgiveness and eternal security that Boaz was

only a momentary picture of for her.

What a faithful and loving father we have. Naomi couldn't have seen that. We can't see what God is up to. Jesus, though, as the ultimate expression of God's faithful love, steps into our pain.

Comes around to the backside of the tapestry, as it were, with us, and endures every knotted, frayed strand so that he can assure us that the weaver is full of faithful love and that he's doing gloriously beautiful things.

He doesn't tell us why the bad things happen or where it's all going, but he wants us to know he loves us and we can trust him.

[30 : 58] I know you may not see the beautiful front side, but do you see the weaver? He's been faithful and loving for a long time.

And he's still today the faithful, loving God, weaver of your story. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for showing us that picture entering into the lives of these widows several thousand years ago.

Father, you've been loving faithfully for a long time. And you haven't stopped. And we're so grateful. Teach our hearts to trust you that we might find your love to be better than life and that it might enter into our pain and as it encourages our tears might also bring comfort in who you are and how you love.

[32 : 08] Thank you in Jesus' name. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. Thank you.