

Ruth “God’s Restoration Work”

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! Let's pray together. Our help, our God, we come to you. We ask for your help because it's who you are. Help us to trust you.

Even now, Father, meet us in your word as you're speaking to us. Help us to hear. Restore our relationship. Restore the joy of our salvation, of knowing you, of seeing Jesus and knowing the Father. Restore the love of Jesus in our hearts.

We ask in His name. Amen. As we have been studying these great Old Testament stories over the last few weeks, getting to know more about the God who rescues and restores us to relationship with Himself.

Often, Yahweh has worked miraculously, right? Speaking directly to His people, sending dreams to them, parting the Red Sea, right?

[1 : 34] Incredible miracles. But most of the time, God is at work in the mundane as much as He is in the miraculous.

Through ordinary people as much as extraordinary events. And in the book of Ruth, there are a lot of very normal people going through normal, even difficult lives.

And God is going to show up right there. He's going to work in very normal ways to bring beautiful restoration. I want you to notice that as we get started because that is true not only of much of the Bible, that there's not an explicit miracle on every page, right?

But it's also true of most of our lives, isn't it? Most of us are living in the mundane. And we need God's restoration, don't we?

We need God to show up in our lives too and work and bring us back to Himself. So open your Bibles this morning to Ruth.

[2 : 47] We're going to walk through the whole story today. It's not that long of a book. It's one of my favorite Bible stories. A glorious picture of our faithful God who loves to restore us to relationship with Himself.

One of the helpful ways to track with this story is through the names of the people in the story. Kids, you should have gotten something on the way in.

If you didn't and your parents are okay, you can go back there and get one now. But you should have gotten a sheet with several names on it, okay? They may be unfamiliar names.

But I want you to listen this morning to what the names mean. I'm going to tell you what all seven of them mean, just not all at the beginning, okay? And they're going to help tell the story of Ruth.

One of the great restoration projects in modern history culminated last week when the historic towers of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris opened again to the public for the first time since the fire in 2019.

[3 : 58] At many times over the past six years, though, if you had looked inside, you might have thought what was going on was a demolition rather than a restoration.

Excavators clearing rubble, damaged arches being torn down all over the place. It seemed that things inside the cathedral were just getting worse.

All in an effort to have the beauty of this building restored. And that may be where you feel like you are with God.

If you feel like your life is falling apart more than it is fixing up. If it feels like a demolition rather than a restoration, then you're going to relate to this family.

Ruth chapter 1. In the days when the judges ruled. Now just remember where we are in the story that last week we were with the judges and Gideon.

[5 : 11] We're now in the promised land. God's people are there. But the judges ruled and they were not only in the land. There was a lot of idolatry going on. They were turning from God.

That's why he had to send judges to bring them back. People were doing what was right in their own eyes. There was no king to keep them on track.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. Another problem. Famine is a covenant curse. And a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab.

Never a good sign to leave God's land and God's people, right? This is the context of this story. He left. He and his wife and his two sons.

The name of the man was Elimelech. The name of the man was Elimelech. The name of his wife, Naomi. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died. And she was left with her two sons.

[6 : 22] Elimelech. It's the first name in this story. Elimelech, kids, means God is my king. Except he's not living like that.

Elimelech is taking control of his own life. Deciding he's going to go fix things for himself and his family. And then he dies. Not long thereafter, both of his boys marry Moabite women in this land he's taken them to.

But then both of the boys die. As you might imagine, there is a lot of weeping in the first chapter of this book.

Naomi is faced with terrible suffering. Deep grief. Widowed. Now childless.

In a foreign land, isolated. 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.

[7 : 39] And we were equally devastated a few weeks later when we found out that we had suffered a miscarriage. The loss of a child and the joy and the hope that children promise is so painful, isn't it?

Others of you share that particular grief with us, with Naomi. Naomi. But whatever grief or loss you carry, it is really easy to look around you and conclude what Naomi concluded and how she explained it to her friends at the end of chapter 1.

She said to them, 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 Naomi's life has led her to that conclusion, hasn't it? It feels that God is demolishing rather than restoring.

[8 : 58] His presence seems distant. His promises seem false. His character seems undesirable. Can you blame her?

Have you felt this way too? God, I've trusted you. I've tried to follow you.

I've wanted to hold on to hope. But look what's happened. In the rest of Naomi's story, God demonstrates that despite this very understandable feeling of God being against her and demolishing her, quite the opposite is true.

God is actually full of faithful love for Naomi. He's actually restoring her to himself. He's still with Naomi. His character is trustworthy and his promises are greater than she could imagine.

But right now, she's bitter. She says, don't even call me Naomi, pleasant. That's a good name.

[10 : 17] Call me Mara, bitter. She's bitter. Even in the midst of her bitterness, there's another name through which God is giving a glimpse of his faithful love to Naomi.

It's through Ruth, which means friend. Someone to comfort Naomi. I mean, by all accounts, at this point in the story, Naomi should have come home completely alone, right?

Instead, something amazing 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 the one great miracle in the book of Ruth.

I didn't say I felt that way. I just said that's what the commentators said. It's not just her deep love for Naomi.

It's that she deeply loves Yahweh. That she's willing to follow him into a seemingly hopeless future heading back to Bethlehem.

[11 : 35] Why would Ruth do that? Naomi tells her the only reasonable decision for Ruth is to remain in Moab. That's where she's got family. She's got people. She's got history there.

And the other daughter-in-law gets it. She goes back. She stays in Moab. But Ruth clung to her. Verse 14, covenant language.

And she says, 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. And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there will I be buried. Now that's a strong commitment.

Her words indicate this profound faith in Israel's God. Her actions demonstrate a profound covenant commitment. It's like the God who clings to, who sticks with his people no matter what.

[12:41] Ruth will not let go of Naomi. She's whispering to her. Naomi's bitter, right? But Ruth is whispering by her actions what the Bible story teaches us about God, doesn't it?

I love the way British preacher Charles Spurgeon famously said this. God is too good to be unkind. And he is too wise to be mistaken.

And when we cannot trace his hand, we must trust his heart. When we can't see what he's doing in our lives, we trust what he's like all the time.

Naomi couldn't possibly see what God is doing. But her friend, a comforter, is returning with her to the promised land, to the God of the promise.

Can she trust his heart? His faithful love? Is this actually just a demolition? Or is there hope for restoration?

[13:47] Well, you know that there's hope. Notice as they return to the promised land that God typically does his restoration work in covenant community.

As we walk through this beautiful blessing of restoration for Ruth and Naomi, notice how it happens. Chapter 2. Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech whose name was Boaz.

They like highlighting names here in the book of Ruth. That's why we're going to do that some. Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor.

And she said to her, Go, my daughter. So Ruth set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz.

That's irony, by the way. She just so happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz who was of the clan of Elimelech. Now, it's not going to make a lot of sense if you don't understand what gleaning is.

[14:57] It's important to understand gleaning in ancient Israel. God establishes this practice in his law that he gives to his people in order to provide for the widow, the poor, and the foreigner.

When you harvest your fields, what you're supposed to do is leave bits around the edges for those people to glean, to gather for themselves. See, God's loving law in his promised land is designed to provide for the material needs of those on the margins of society.

Like Ruth and Naomi. And Boaz means strength. Means strength.

He well represents the heart of his God. Boaz doesn't just meet the minimum requirements to get by on the law, does he? He actually, he goes to meet Ruth personally.

He speaks to the men working in the field to provide her protection. He even sees to it that she gets more than the usual. Listen to what Boaz tells Ruth.

[16:10] All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me. How you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.

The Lord repay you for what you have done. A full reward be given you by Yahweh, 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. Ruth, I've seen it in you. Let me show it to you as well. I want you to know what it's like under his wings.

God is showing through Boaz, through Ruth to Naomi that she's empty in order that he may fill her. That's the kind of faithful love he has.

We dare not minimize her emptiness and pain. But we dare not overlook God's provision as he faithfully demonstrates his loving care for her.

[17:13] Naomi doesn't miss it. She's starting to see. Verse 20. May he be blessed by the Lord whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.

His faithful love has not left her empty or alone. See, it is God's love in God's land, now that they're back, through God's law, that gleaning provision, right?

Lived out by God's people, first Ruth, now Boaz, later the women of the community, that is restoring Naomi in relationship with God, isn't it?

Don't miss that. The message of the book of Ruth to its first audience. Think about this. If you're one of God's people in exile, perhaps, or maybe in the land, but in rebellion, chasing after idols.

What would the message have been to you when you read this book? It would have been turn back to God. Come back to his law. Come back to his people.

[18 : 22] Come back to his people. That's what we need to hear, isn't it? When we feel far from God. Sometimes we wonder why we feel so distant from God.

When we spend very little time in his word. When we rarely attend the gathered worship of his people. When we rarely slow our busy lives down to live in true relationship with people in his family.

Maybe it shouldn't be a surprise that God feels distant. Before you protest, I'm not suggesting that this is simple or automatic. Like, just go to church and you'll always feel good.

No, no. Remember, Naomi's last experience with God's people was marked by what? Idolatry and famine. Ten years later, I bet you she worried if she went back to Bethlehem as a widow with no land.

Whether she would be provided for at all. Some of you have had such experiences with God's church. Where you did not experience his gracious heart.

[19 : 45] His full welcome. His generous provision. I'm sorry. We can be so self-focused sometimes.

It's not okay. But, this is among God's people where God most often, most regularly sets up his restoration projects.

Where we can most regularly meet him. It is in his word. Slowing down to listen to him and to talk with him. It's with his people. Having others to point you to his faithfulness when you can't see it.

Like the women in chapter 4, we're going to read as they encourage Naomi to see God's provision. To praise him for it when it's not there for her. If you feel distant from God.

You came here this morning. Maybe that's part of why you came. God just seems so far away. Maybe I'll go to church. Keep opening his word.

[20 : 54] Keep sharing life with God's people. Here or elsewhere. Lean into your grace group. Like really, not just show up some.

Keep sitting with us at this table where God sits with us. Where he feeds us. See, that's the way that he has designed to work. Because he is so committed to restoring us to relationship with himself.

That he so wants you to know the blessing of his gracious provision. That he did what? He set up his church. So you wouldn't be alone.

So you wouldn't think he'd forgotten you. So you'd have reminders of his faithful love all the time. Do you see his kindness in that? Trust his heart.

Even when you can't trace his hand. Now if you are already in the covenant community. Perhaps, I'm going to go to the other extreme.

[21 : 57] You're not feeling distant from God. You've been in the covenant community in church so long. You can't remember what it's like to feel left out. Right? You know everybody.

You don't remember feeling uncertain if anyone sees you or knows you. Afraid you'll still be hungry and distant from God in a few weeks.

If that's you, friend, we must move toward those who are hurting and isolated to welcome them in. What a privilege that is, right?

We actually reflect the heart of God who's meeting our needs. That's what he's made us to be. Christy and I tasted this in St. Louis.

When women, sisters in our church came around her and loved her and understood her pain following the miscarriage way better than I did.

[22 : 57] We've experienced it in Scotland. When we had exactly zero friends as far as we knew in the whole country. We found out we had family in a tiny church.

Most of them decades older than we were. And they helped us belong. We've repeatedly found it here with y'all.

When y'all have cried with us over medical struggles. When you've prayed for us and for our kids. When you have loved and forgiven us.

Even when we've hurt you and disappointed you. Did you know, Southwood family, that you are part of a family?

Part of a community that God designed very intentionally to show his love. To put it on a billboard. To help people have a taste.

[24 : 00] Especially the widow. And the orphan. And the hungry. And the needy. And the foreigner. And those with no place to live. And those convinced. God is against me.

To give them a taste of how wanted they are at the family dinner table. Did you know you were a part of a community that God called together?

And built together to do that very thing. So that people would actually know him. And the reality of his love in a new way. That's the story of God's covenant people.

And as the story goes. We're often pretty bad at representing his heart. So give up. No. No, no. He's so good. That he keeps restoring us. To that relationship with him. And that role of then. Us having the privilege of restoring others.

[25 : 04] To him. That's how good. Even if you think you're the worst. Even if you're at the worst church ever. At showing God's love. There's all the hope in the world.

That's what he's like. There's actually more along these lines. Back to the story of Ruth and Naomi. Will they just survive? Eking by on gleaning for the rest of their lives.

Is that what happens? No. God has even greater provision for them. It's relational on top of material. Again, it's through Boaz. Again, it's through the loving nature of God's law that Boaz embraces.

Ruth chapter 3. And a brief disclaimer. Ruth chapter 3 is not dating advice. I would never encourage any of my three daughters to find a husband this way.

That's not the point. But much of what develops here instead is connected to a part of God's law that provides for what is called a kinsman redeemer.

[26 : 08] It's more than this, but essentially the law is designed for someone to bring help to a relative about to lose his land. It's a huge deal.

Needing an heir? Or having died and left a widow uncared for? In this case, all three apply.

Naomi, knowing that this Boaz is one of those relatives who could redeem the land and them, sends Ruth back to him.

It's a poignant scene. Ruth sneaks up on a sleeping Boaz. Boaz, and at midnight, he wakes up and realizes there's a woman at his feet. Verse 9, he said, who are you?

Reasonable question. And she answered, I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. And he said, may you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter.

[27 : 13] You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask.

For all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. He reassures her. But actually, while Boaz is a redeemer, there's a closer relative who, by law, gets first right of refusal.

And Boaz is going to follow God's law in this matter. He finds this closer relative. And then there's this exchange at the beginning of chapter 4 with sandals taken off and deals being struck.

Listen, it serves to highlight the costliness of Boaz's redemption. The other guy is interested. I will redeem it, he says, when he hears about the land.

Verse 5 of chapter 4. Boaz said, oh, by the way, the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.

[28 : 27] Then the redeemer said, oh, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.

Too costly for him, right? Can't afford to take on the land and two widows. No name backs down. And Boaz's strength steps up. He'll marry this Moabite widow. He'll continue to provide for Naomi and Ruth.

He'll ensure they experience Yahweh's faithful love, even though it costs him. I suspect that costly faithfulness reminds you of Ruth.

Who, just a little while ago, was willing to sacrifice social standing, family prospects, and any future prosperity to show God's faithful love to Naomi.

[29 : 33] I hope that costly faithfulness reminds you of Jesus, who was willing to sacrifice the comforts of heaven, the privileges of divinity, and even his life to show God's faithful love to us.

What a wonderful picture then Boaz is of our true and great kinsman redeemer, the one who became like us in order to rescue and restore us to relationship with God forever.

I pray that that costly faithfulness then reminds you, inspires you in a life of sacrificial love as one of God's covenant people.

I'll be honest with you. It will cost you big to show big love to people with big needs. It's what God does. So you'll find the joy in that of sharing the heart of God, the faithful love of Christ.

It's your privilege. It's your responsibility as one of His. Think back to Naomi as she journeys back from Moab to Bethlehem.

[30 : 57] She's bitter. She's alone, assuming that her family line has ended completely. She's convinced that God is against her.

Her most hopeful prayer, can you imagine in that low place what she could have most dreamed and prayed for was like a safe trip home and a roof over her head.

That would have seemed unbelievable. Too good to be true. But God has provided beyond what she could ever imagine.

Boaz and Ruth, it doesn't just give her a little bit of wheat. They get married. And soon they have a son. Naomi's family line will continue.

Unbelievable. She holds this boy in her arms and she gets to help raise him. It's clearly a gift from God. He doesn't erase the pain of the boys that Naomi lost.

[32 : 05] 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 truth about God.

The women of her community say to Naomi, Blessed be the Lord who has not left you this day without a redeemer. And may his name be renowned in Israel.

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.

In fact, these dear sisters of hers are so close to her that I don't know if this still happens, but they actually get to name her grandson. Obed.

Is that what y'all name other people's grandkids? Obed? Stop doing that. But it means worshiper. Praise God, Naomi, who deserves all the worship.

[33 : 09] He is a restorer who has restored Naomi to himself, to life, to hope beyond what she could have asked or imagined. That's what he does.

When forest fires roar through California's redwood forests, these massive trees have fires even up inside of them, most of us would look and assume this tree will be demolished, destroyed.

The forest barren like this in just a few days. It looks from everything we can see like that's what's happening.

But God has designed these amazing trees so that they not only typically survive these forests, but also are actually strengthened by these fires so that they grow and they thrive and they get stronger through the fires to become majestic forests that expand and that thrive for hundreds of years.

Naomi's burning family tree becomes a glorious forest, doesn't it? Kids, you got another sheet that has a family tree picture, the picture of a tree with a bunch of names on it, okay?

[34 : 36] Look at that family tree. God's restoration work often goes beyond what we experience. This is really important as we close.

Because some of you are longing for restoration that you will not get to experience in this life.

Maybe you just have met Jesus or just learned what a relationship with Him is in your latter years.

Maybe your family situation will still be unreconciled when you die. Maybe life's gotten so confusing and overwhelming that you can't trace God's hand anywhere in your life.

But you can trust His heart. He's too good to be unkind. He's too wise to be mistaken.

You're starting to see His faithful love. And I want you to have this hope. His restoration work goes beyond what we experience here. Naomi couldn't possibly see what God was up to, where He was taking her.

[35 : 51] In fact, she never knows in this life the full outworking of His gracious, glorious promises. Ruth's son, whom Naomi cares for, is Obed.

He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Yes, that David. At the time Ruth was written, the greatest Israelite you could have possibly claimed to have in your family line, the great King David.

This story begins with a reference to the days of the judges when there was no king with great reason for sadness. And it ends with a king and great cause for hope.

In fact, we know now that eventually in that family line, in that tree of Boaz and David, would come Jesus Himself, the King of kings, whose name means God saves.

God saves. From an empty, bitter widow and her Gentile daughter-in-law who needed a Redeemer comes the great Redeemer.

[37 : 07] See, God works to meet our needs beyond what we even realize our needs are, doesn't He? Naomi, she knew she needed a kinsman Redeemer, but God used the first one, Boaz, the one she thought she needed, to bring the kinsman Redeemer, Naomi, really needed, who would pay an even costlier price to provide for her restoration to God, her forgiveness, and her eternal security that Boaz was only a momentary picture of.

What a good and great God we have. He doesn't tell us why the bad things happen.

Why the fires rage in our lives. Even what the new forest will exactly look like.

But He wants us to know He's not against us. He loves us. We can trust Him. And He has been in the restoration business for a long time, bringing us back to Himself.

It's what He's doing, even if I can't explain to you how, in your life, bringing you back to Himself, because He is the faithful, loving God of your story.

[38 : 25] Kids, I hope you got at least that last name. God saves. Jesus means God saves. The angel tells Joseph, right?

You will give Him the name Jesus because He will save His people from their sins. John the Baptist says, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Jesus Himself said, This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. That last thing He said on the night that He was betrayed, when He sat with His disciples to celebrate the Passover, and He took bread, and He broke it, and He gave it to His disciples.

As I, ministering in His name, give this bread to you. He said to them, Take and eat. This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

And then after supper, He took the cup, and He said, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. My blood is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. Drink from it, all of you.

[39 : 44] For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. You say, You say, There's nothing else that can be done for my sin, except Jesus pay for it, and wash it, and forgive it forever.

This is the table of the Lord. Not of Southwood, of the Presbyterian church. It is the Lord's table. He invites all who trust His death in your place, as your only hope for restoration, in your relationship with God, who are baptized members of any church that teaches that good news, to come and eat. Even if your life feels right now like a demolition, even if you're convinced that's all you can feel, is that it's not going the way it should, He invites you to come and eat with Him, and hope in His restoration.

It's the only one. He's the only way that we're restored to God. If that's not your hope, we're so glad you're here this morning.

We would invite you today, not to come and take bread and wine, but you're welcome to come and observe, to sit and pray.

[41 : 06] What we would love for you to do is to consider the invitation to take Jesus, to be restored to God, now and forever, by one who has come to forgive all of your sins forever.

We would love to talk with you about that relationship. Let me pray, and then we'll come to the table together. Father, Jesus, thanks so much for setting the table this morning.

Thank you that you've stayed by your Spirit to eat with us, not just that we would have a little bread and wine, but that through them, your Spirit would minister your very presence, the reality of who you are, to our hearts.

build our faith, because most of us, God, we just can't see what you're doing in our lives. So it's hard for us to trust you many days.

So strengthen our faith. Remind us you're with us. Remind us you're for us. Remind us Jesus loves us and has given himself for us.

[42 : 24] We ask in his name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at [southwood.org](https://yetanother sermon.host). Thank you.