Ruin

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0:00] Good morning and welcome to St. Paul's this morning across the live stream. It's now three months since we stopped gathering on site for our Sunday services.

So if this is the first time you've tuned in, it's great to have you here. And welcome to all the St. Paul's family out there. If you don't know who I am, I'm Steve Jeffrey. I'm the senior pastor of St. Paul's.
And so it's wonderful for me to be able to kick off this brand new series in Ruth with us this morning. It is the first time in just over 100 years that we have not been able to hold public services and to not be able to do so for three months, not be able to meet face to face due to this pandemic has been an unusual season.
We are now, however, starting to slowly regather, having been scattered for three months. We've been, if you like, away scattered.
We're now slowly regathering and coming back again. This theme, which has been the theme for us over these three months of going away and coming back, is in fact part of the rhythm of normal life.
[1:09] What we do so much of it in terms of going away and coming back, we don't even think that's in fact what we're doing. We go to school and we come home again. We go to the playground, to the shops, to restaurants, to work, and then we come back home.

We depart for a holiday and then we come back home. We have 20-year-olds who move out and then they come back home. This constant pattern.
In fact, I can't believe I'm actually saying this, but perhaps this opera, Home and Away, is tuning into something for us in life, part of the rhythms of life.
Home and away, it's what they do. Of course, sometimes the going away is forced on us by circumstances and coming back is not always possible.
For instance, the transition into a care facility, refugees fleeing a terrible situation in their home, and even death itself is a going away but not coming back.
[2:14] This theme, this pattern, if you like, of going away and coming back runs through many of the stories of the Bible.

In fact, one of the grand narratives of the whole Bible, which begins with people being scattered from God because of sin, but ends with people being gathered back to God because of his rescue plan and salvation plan for them into their eternal home, is the grand narrative of the Bible.
So many stories of salvation of the Bible carry this theme. Abraham went down to Egypt because of a famine and later returned home.
The whole family of Israel went down to Egypt because of a famine and then returned back to the promised land, their home.
Later on in their history, Israel again will go into exile because of a spiritual famine, and God will bring them back home again.
[3:25] And of course, what Adrian read out to us, one of the more famous passages in the New Testament of the prodigal son who went down away from his home to a foreign land, got hit with a famine, and then came back home again.

So the whole Bible story is about people leaving paradise with God and then God bringing them back, saving his people and returning them back to himself.
And that means that as we open up the very first chapter of the book of Ruth with this description of people leaving home and coming back again because of a famine should alert us to something is big in the wind.
Something significant is happening in this book. It's not just a Old Testament rom-com. There's something deeper, bigger happening in the book of Ruth.

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It's the old pattern of God working some act of salvation when his people leave their land and his presence, and then he brings them back. So if you've got your Bibles there, I'd love it if you could turn to Ruth chapter 1 and also the St. Paul's app.
[4:42] If you click into there, you'll see an outline for today's message. I've really got two major points with a few little sub points in there, but two major points, really simple, going away and coming back.

I considered calling it home and away, but we'll just go with going away, coming back. So going away to ruin is my first point. Israel's ruin, according to verse 1 of chapter 1, the very first verse of this book is this story of Ruth takes place during the time of the judges of Israel.
This was a 400-year period after Israel entered the promised land under Joshua and before there were any kings in Israel.
It's roughly about 1500 BC to 1100 BC. And so verse 1 is not just a date stamp on the book so we can locate it historically.
It is, in fact, a theological description of the times in which these events of the book of Ruth take place. When I preached through the book of Judges about two years ago, I said you could summarise the message of the book of Judges as despicable people doing deplorable things.
[6:13] That's the summary of this time. It records a history of murder and assassination and massacres of immorality and lawlessness and unfaithfulness. In fact, right towards the end of the book of Judges, chapter 21, verse 25, it says, in those days Israel had no king and so everyone did as they saw fit.

Pretty much a description of modern society, really. Everyone does as they see fit. But for Israel, it was a very dark time.
The people would sin. God would hand them over to their sin. He would send enemies against them and the people would cry out for help. And then God would mercifully raise up a judge, a rescuer for his people and deliver them, bring them back to himself.
A repeated pattern of the nation going away from God and God bringing them back home to himself. And by the end of the book of Judges, we have a picture of a nation that has really just completely lost its way.
What the book of Ruth does for us is it gives us a glimpse into the hidden work of God during the worst of times.
[7:40] The book of Ruth is a zooming in on the book of Judges, if you like, and one family during these dark days. From the narrative of the nation in the book of Judges, we now focus on one family.

We go from a nation in ruin to a family in ruin. And to, in fact, a life in ruin.
It was during these dark days and difficult days that a man moved his family out of Israel. A move that saw his family come to ruin.
Verse one again. In those days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And so a man named, a man from Bethlehem in Judea, together with his wife and his two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.
Now the ultimate irony has occurred. Bethlehem, which means house of bread is a place of no food.
[8:57] Verses one to five in chapter one just moves so fast. But ultimately they paint a picture of ruin. First, there is a famine in Judah.

Then there's a decision to relocate for this family to Moab, a pagan land with its foreign gods. Then grief upon famine strikes as Elimelech, the husband to Naomi, dies.
Then in verse four, Naomi and Elimelech's two sons take Moabite wives, one named Orpah, the other named Ruth.
And again, the hand of God falls. Verse five sums up Naomi's tragedy. After 10 years of childless marriages, both Marlon and Kilion also died.
And Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. She's a foreigner, a foreign woman. In a patriarchal society, Naomi is bereft.
[10:06] Along with her husband and sons, she attempted to escape the famine in Bethlehem. I'm sorry, but all that has happened is for her a descent into emptiness.

A grasp for hope, a grasp for future, resulted in emptiness. The move to Moab has been disastrous. Naomi has hit rock bottom.

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She is empty. She's bereft. She's destitute. She went there in a search of life and she has become empty. And the implicit question in these very first verses is what future does Naomi have?
Can she possibly recover from this? Will she remain destitute and empty? And then we are told in verse six, Naomi gets a word.
And at first, it appears to be a word of hope. But is it hope for Naomi? It says, the Lord has come to the aid of his people by providing food for them.
[11:16] How was she to feel about that? The Lord came to the aid of his people in Bethlehem.

But she wasn't one of them. She wasn't there. Was her going away a terrible mistake?
She didn't just leave Bethlehem, but also the people of God and her God and all of her hope as well. She had brought shame to herself, to her people, to her God.
And so, does she deserve what our society would call getting cancelled? Up to the end of verse five, Naomi is just like the prodigal son in Luke 15 that Adrian read out to us.
He thought life would be better in a faraway country away from the rule and the oversight and the provision of his father.
[12:32] But like Naomi, he too hits rock bottom and he is bereft, he is empty, he is hungry, he is lonely. What the story of the prodigal son is meant to be portraying to us is the theme of the Bible.

It is a vivid picture of humanity's ruin as they walk away from God. The Bible says we have all, like sheep have gone astray, we have all wandered away from God who has made us, made all things and provides all good things for us and the Bible calls it sin.
It's the attitude that says we don't need God in our life, we don't want God in our life and that attitude results in actions and thoughts, behaviours that sees us as individuals, as societies living as we see fit in our own eyes.
Living as we see fit in our own eyes without God and it always feels free for a season in the same way that jumping out of an aeroplane feels free for a season until you realise that you don't have a parachute.
In Luke 15 verse 14 we read of the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, after he had spent everything there was a severe famine in the whole country and he began to be in need.
[14:18] His bid for freedom resulted in slavery. Verse 15, so he went and he hired himself out and the word literally means he attached himself to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

This young guy has to sell himself as a slave to work in a foreign pig pen. Life hits rock bottom.
His bid for the better life the free life ends up in slavery instead. You see when you break your attachment with God you will end up attached to another and that attachment will not be sonship and freedom it will be slavery.
It will desire you. You will have to live for it. It may be romance, it may be a career, it may be reputation, comfort, leisure, culture, it might be family.
The attachment might be crude, it might be refined. If we break loose from God we will be attached to another and that other will require you to sacrifice everything for it.
[15:45] In the end, whether crude or refined, this attachment will send us to the pig pen. One of the key challenges early in the book of Ruth is trying to work out how we meant to feel about the characters of this book.

Because traditionally it's taken as a bit of an Old Testament rob-com where just people of virtue.
And yet God had warned Israel in Deuteronomy 32 that he would send them famine if they worshipped idols as they did in the days of the judges.
You see Elimelech had a choice to make. He had a road to choose which one he would go. He could stay in Bethlehem the empty bread basket of Judah mourning the sin that surrounded him in his society and trusting God for the provision for his family.
Alternatively he could leave the promised land behind in pursuit of greener fields. theologically these are not equal choices.
This is not simply Elimelech choosing to move to another city because he's got a job offer there.
God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt.
[17:30] He brought them to the land of Canaan, the promised land. This was the land that God would dwell with his people in harmony as they lived out their relationship with him as a redeemed people.

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However, these people rebelled against him as we see again and again in the book of Judges. There was no king in Elimelech's life and therefore, like so many of his countrymen, he chose to do what was best in his own eyes.
It's the same choice that each of us face in life. I live for myself and do what I think is best with my life or I follow the created God and what he determines is best for life.
And the Bible is explicit. when you choose to live life our way, when we do that, eternal ruin is the future.
So is Naomi's emptiness God's judgment on her life? love. The interesting thing about this text is it doesn't tell us.
[18:50] It's not made explicit in this text in the way that it is in so many other places including the book of Judges. The people did that and God says I'm going to judge you.

He doesn't do that here. And yet Naomi is in no doubt about the source of her ruin.
Verse 13 she says the Lord's hand has turned against me. Then again at the end of the chapter she says the same thing.
In verse 20 the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.
she says it's God who's done it. Now frankly I would take Naomi's theology here any day over the sentimental views of God which dominate the books of many Christian bookshelves.
[19:57] Naomi is sure of three things in this text. God exists, God is sovereign and God has inflicted her. God the Almighty reigns in all the affairs of people.

He rules the nation and he rules the families and he rules Naomi's life. He gives rain, he takes it away, he gives life, he takes it away. In him we live, we move, we have our being.
He is the all encompassing, the all pervading reality of life. And Naomi was right and we should join her in this conviction.
God the Almighty reigns in all the affairs of people. So Naomi is right here to believe in a sovereign almighty God who governs the affairs and the nations and the families and gives each day its parts of both pain and pleasure.
He does both. But what Naomi needs is to open her eyes a little bit more to the signs of his merciful purposes in her life.
[21:22] If she doesn't, then her theology just becomes determination fatalism, fatalism, an almighty being who's not personal, not relational and certainly not good.

While she can't see it straight away, it's in fact in heading home that we see God's merciful purposes for her being worked out in her life.
That's the second point I want to get to. In verses 7 to 18 of chapter 1, the writer here devotes a large chunk of space to the journey home.
Five verses is all it took. Five verses to describe the descent to Moab, the tragedy that struck, but more than double that on the journey back to Bethlehem.
And most of these verses here are in fact Naomi's efforts to try and dissuade her daughter-in-laws from returning with her.
[22:34] And so what therefore stands out in these verses is Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi. In fact, one of God's mercies to Naomi.

It's quite amazing. Verse 14 says that Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye but Ruth clung to her.
And that is all the more amazing after Naomi's grim description of what their future life with her would be like. Ruth stays with her in spite of an apparent hopeless future of widowhood and childlessness.
Naomi paints a future that is black. And Ruth took her hand and walked into it with her.
What a blessing. And the amazing words of Ruth are found in verse 16. Have a look at it with me. Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.
[23:44] 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 I'll be buried.

May the Lord deal with me. Be it ever so severely if even death separates you and me. Now the more you ponder these words, the more amazing they become.
Ruth's commitment to her destitute mother-in-law is simply astonishing. It is a picture of commitment which is God's commitment to Naomi. It means for Ruth here, leaving her own family, her own land.

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It means as far as she knows, a life of widowhood and childlessness because Naomi has no man to give her. And if she marries another non-relative Naomi, her commitment to Naomi's family is cut at that point.
It ceases. It's lost. It means going to an unknown land with a new people, with a new custom, with a new language. And it was in fact a commitment even deeper than marriage.
[24:56] Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me be it ever so severely if even death separates you and me.

In other words, Ruth says, I will never return home. Even when you die, my commitment to you is not finished.
the most amazing commitment of all is in verse 16. Your God will be my God.
Naomi has just said in verse 13, saying, the Lord's hand has turned against me. Naomi's experience of God in this moment was bitterness.
And in spite of this, Ruth forsakes her religious heritage and makes the God of Israel her God.
Somehow or other, Ruth had come to trust in Naomi's God in spite of Naomi's bitter experiences.
[26:13] That did not turn her away. Ruth's faith in God sees beyond the present setbacks, the present bitter setbacks, freedom from the securities and the comforts of the world and the courage to venture to the unknown and the strange.

So what called Naomi home? Even in Naomi's bitter talk about God punishing her, there is an acknowledgement here of his sovereign grace.
In verse 21, she acknowledges, the Lord has brought me back. Her husband made the decision to leave, but the Lord has brought her back.
And while in this moment she thinks she's coming back empty, I mean she's roost with her, she obviously not focused on that very much, she thinks she's coming back empty but it is God who provides the delicate touch of hope at the end of verse 22.
And this is an amazing word of hope, they arrived in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. You see, it wasn't just emptiness that brought her back, it was news that brought her back.
[27:51] It was in fact good news that brought her back home. News about something that God had done brought her back.

The Lord had visited his people and he had ended the famine. It was good news that called her back home. She wasn't just coming back to Bethlehem, she was coming back to her God.
You see, like the book of Judges, the book of Ruth is just pure gospel, pure, good, news.
It reveals the God of mercy and long suffering patients who continually works in and through and for his people. It was a truth at a national level and we will see in the coming weeks that it is true at a personal, family, individual level too.
God is at work in the worst of times. God and what's more, this sovereign God keeps doing it despite his people constant resistance to his purposes.
[29:13] God relentlessly offers his grace to people who neither deserve it, they're not seeking it, not even appreciating it, even after they've been saved by it.

So after ten years abandoning her God and her people and her land, what sort of welcome do you think Naomi should receive returning home?
what about the prodigal son in Luke 15? How would you respond to a child who has basically wished you were dead, didn't want anything to do with you except the inheritance?
Nothing with you again, ever. The father in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, it is obvious that he is not sitting in his living room with his feet up waiting for his wayward son to come crawling through the door and his hands and knees groveling and begging for restoration.
Verse 20 tells us that this man, this father ran to meet his son, embraced him, kissed him again and again and again, reinstates him to full membership of the family and calls for a celebration and we are told in Luke 15 that the only emotion the father felt was compassion.
[30:56] This father thinks nothing of his personal loss, nothing of his financial loss, nothing of the damage to his reputation in the community, nothing of his own personal shame.

what an extraordinary welcome and we are told in Luke 15 the reason why Jesus told this story is because he was saying, I am the father who welcomes the son.
when sinners turn from their sin and accept my fellowship as the joy of their lives, they have come home to God through me and God is glad and he celebrates.

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It's a wonderful picture of the grace and the mercy and the love of the compassion of God. The God of the Bible is not into the cancel culture that we currently exist in where you make one mistake on social media and you are what?
Your reputation is ruined. You will never live it down. A shame that will be brought back up again and again and again.
[32:11] the Bible tells us as far as Psalm 103 tells us in the Bible as far as the east is from the west so far has God removed our sin from us and Isaiah tells us he's forgotten them never to be brought up again against us.

The whole story of the Bible is about the human race going away from God and his great plan of salvation of bringing them back again and at the centre of that plan is the Lord Jesus Christ because it is good news about Jesus that calls us back home to God.
The good news that calls us back is about something else that God has done in Bethlehem again but for all of humanity.
And it's infinitely better news than Naomi heard from Bethlehem that turned her around and back home. The core message of Christianity is that in Jesus God comes to running runs to us and meets us.
The king of the universe in all his splendor and glory came to the dirt of Bethlehem. Came to the dirt of Bethlehem, lived a life of obscurity amongst us, worked as a carpenter.
[33:47] God the son left his place of abundance and takes on our emptiness so that we can have his place of abundance.

Jesus left his place of blessing and abundance of glory in heaven entered himself for us not just in the dirt of Bethlehem but by shedding his blood on a cross outside of Jerusalem.
As Jesus was dying on the cross he cried out in every other instance in the New Testament whenever he speaks to his father he calls him father only on the cross he says my God my God why have you forsaken me?
He went into exile removed away from the presence of the father so that we can be brought back in.
He was cancelled so that we can be forgiven.
He took our sin he faced our bitterness and in doing so he turned away from us so that we might be blessed.
[34:56] He took our spiritual famine so that we might have his spiritual feast. You see the good news here is that don't ever think the sin of your past means there's no hope for the future.

God knows exactly what you are like and what I am like deepest down in the recesses of our hearts and yet he still welcomes us.
His love is unconditional. It isn't based on what we are like it is based on what he is like and he calls us home to him. Come home to the God who made you and loves you and is the only one who can fill the emptiness the emptiest and meet your deepest need of your heart.
God's providence in Naomi's life is hard and sometimes God's providence in our life is hard.
He had dealt bitterly with Naomi at least in the short run in the short run it only felt like bitterness for her but not long term.
[36:44] Some might say it was a punish for the sin of going to Moab and marrying foreign women. Maybe. Maybe. Not necessarily.

Maybe. Psalm 34 verse 19 says the righteous person may have many troubles but the Lord delivers him from them all.
That is the Bible never promises that believers will escape difficulty in life as well. But suppose Naomi's calamity was in fact owing to her and her husband's disobedience.
What if it was? That makes this story remarkable. It makes it if you like doubly encouraging because it shows that God is willing and able even to turn his severe judgments into our joys.
Bitterness just for a moment. And what this Bible is saying, what this passage is saying is come back. Jesus is saying to you whatever you've done, whatever you've become, come back home to your God.
[38:12] I want to pray with you right now. And I'm just going to pray really slowly. And maybe the prayer that I pray, you might want to echo it in your heart and come back to God now. Let's do that.

our gracious God, I just want to thank you for your love and your compassion.
I want to thank you for giving us, giving me life. sorry that I, that we have lived it for ourselves and not for you.

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Thank you that Jesus dealt with my sin at the cross, that he was turned away, that he was made destitute so that we can be brought back in.
He was emptied so that we could be filled. He took my sin so that I could be forgiven. So please forgive me and accept me because of him and help me to start living for you.
[39:31] Amen.

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