

# You: Practising

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'm going to pray that God would help us to understand his word. We pray, Lord Jesus, that as we come to your word now, we pray that you would speak to us by your spirit, that you'd grow us in Christ. And we pray that we would glorify your name in response to the things that you say to us.

In Jesus' name, amen. We've spent the last few weeks in this series preaching about the kingdom of God, going from beginning to end in the Bible. So we've looked right across the Bible from creation to new creation.

We've been in Genesis 1, the first chapter of the Bible, and we've gone to Revelation 22, the very last chapter in the Bible. And we've been looking at what it means to be God's people in his place and under his kingship.

And today what I'm going to do is I'm taking us back to the book of Ruth, which we've just had read to us so helpfully, to a particular part of the Bible, to try to make sense of it in terms of God's big picture purposes.

You can blame Brian Tung for this. I think he said we need to apply what we've been learning over the last few weeks. So that's where we are. But I would say also that we've been applying it as we've been going along as well.

[ 1 : 11 ] And I think what I'm doing this morning is... One of the courses that I taught when I was in South Africa a few weeks ago was called Promise to Fulfillment. And the course teaches a method for coming to a Bible passage, any Bible passage, and teaching it with regard to God's big picture purposes.

The process has got a technical name, biblical theology. I don't think I'm going to use that expression again in this message this morning. But it doesn't matter where you go in the Bible, it's like going to a particular passage and asking these questions about it.

Where does the passage fit with regard to the whole of biblical history? What type of literature are we reading? That's the second question. A third question is, where does this fit in the Bible?

Where does it fit in the immediate context and where does it fit in a wider context? A fourth question is, what did it mean to its original readers? So when they picked this up and read it, what's it saying to them?

And the fifth question, for us sitting in church here in Chatswood this Sunday morning is, what does it mean to us? When we read this passage now, what's it saying to us?

[ 2 : 23 ] What is God saying to us? So the first question is a historical question. I want you to have the passage open, or the little sheet open. I know it's hard to read for some of you. But the historical question, chapter 1, verse 1, in the days when the judges ruled.

Starts to put it in a historical context, and the very last verses, chapter 4, verses 21 and 22, Salmon, the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

So when we talk about David, we're thinking King David, we're going back a thousand years before the time of Christ. We're talking about three thousand years ago. And in the days when the judges ruled, we're talking about a period of time between when Joshua led the people of Israel into the promised land, and settled there, and the two or three hundred year period between them and God establishing a kingship under King David.

So that's the history. From a literary point of view, I hope you see straight away from what we did this morning, it's a story, it's a narrative. By reading the parts, we see that there's a story which is being told by the writer, and so it's a true story.

It's not just a parable which is made up to teach something true from. This is a true story, and the characters are in a historical setting. Now the biblical question, Ruth is between Judges and 1

Samuel.

[ 4 : 04 ] So in chapter 1, verse 1, it says, In the days when the judges ruled. In the days when the judges ruled. And really, if you know your Bible, that is a very negative way to begin the tale.

It's not a very glorious time in Israel's history. It's about a two or three hundred year period from 1300 BC, roundabout after Joshua conquered the land, to 1000 BC, when David was king.

And then you go to the end where we went a minute ago, and it finishes with the words, or Judges itself finishes with the words, chapter 21, verse 25, In those days, Israel had no king.

Everyone did as he saw fit. And if you read across Judges, you will see that it's a time of escalating decline, which finished in civil war, with one tribe, Benjamin, almost being obliterated from amongst the people of God.

Not a happy time in Israel's history. And the recurrent theme, which is mentioned several times in the book of Judges, is, In those days, Israel had no king.

[ 5 : 21 ] In those days, Israel had no king. Chapter 18, verse 1. Chapter 19, verse 1. In those days, Israel had no king. And it's the author's way of saying to us, those days were really bad.

Now, in some ways, Ruth doesn't start much better. Chapter 1, verses 1 to 5, it says, In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi. And the names of his two sons were Marlon and Kilian. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah.

And they went to Moab and they lived there. Now, Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth.

And after they had lived there about 10 years, both Marlon and Kilian also died. And Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. Now, one of the commentators I read, a man who I love, he's spoken at the SMBC preaching conferences a few times, a man called Ralph Davis from the States.

[ 6 : 47 ] He's written about this and he says, Take a look at Ruth 1 to 5. Right away we meet the big word famine. Quite likely a judgment on Israel at large.

And then we hear of the big move. Whether justified or not, need not concern us here. And then of a bad fact, Elimelech dies. And so now we have one death, one widow, two sons.

And next we read of two marriages to foreigners, 10 years, two more deaths, and so three total losses. And he says you can tally up the mathematics of trouble.

One famine, three deaths, three widows, 10 years. Five verses. Five verses. That's the opening block of the book of Ruth.

It's sudden and sobering and instructing it. Instructive. And is it not telling us that one's whole life can fall apart in five verses?

[ 7 : 53 ] That such stuff can actually happen to the people of God? Five tightly packed verses that ought to cure us of falling for the prosperity gospel. So in a time of national disaster, Ruth begins with personal disaster for a particular family.

And that's captured when Naomi says in verse 20, Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara.

Means bitterness. Because the Lord Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full. But the Lord has brought me back empty.

Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. Her name describes her circumstances at that point in her life.

And they are very bitter. And she lays her circumstances at God's feet. He has afflicted me. He has brought misfortune on me.

[ 9 : 15 ] Her faith tells her that her circumstances haven't happened outside of God's control. Are you comfortable when you hear that?

Would you be comfortable sitting with a friend who has lost their husband and their sons? Who has been cut off from their descendants? Who won't be provided for by social security and into old age? Are you comfortable sitting with them in absolute agony and allowing them to say, The Lord has done this to me? I've sat with friends in agony.

And sometimes it's really tempting to give an apology for God at that point. And sometimes it's better to allow them just to pour out their grief and their agony and their distress.

Because even when they're saying, The Lord has done this to me, in some measure they're expressing faith in his sovereignty and his control, even though it seems in the most negative way.

You read across the book of Ruth, and God is strangely silent.

[10:46] He does not speak anywhere. He does not say a word. And we're told the story of a particular family's life.

And we watch and we see what it means for them to live by faith in an unseen God, the Lord. When you read across Ruth, there is a recurring expression.

The writer continually refers to Ruth, The Moabites. The Moabites. He almost shouts at us.

She's an outsider. She's an ethnic. She's not true blue. She's not one of us. She's not a Chatswood original. And Naomi, in chapter 1, verse 15, says to her, Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods.

Go back with her. And Ruth says, Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go. And where you stay, I will stay. And your people will be my people.

[12:03] And your God, my God. And where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried. And may the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.

And so this Moabites, this foreigner, attaches herself to Naomi and to the people of Israel and even more remarkably to the Lord.

You look in your English Bibles where it's got the Lord written in capitals. What it means is Yahweh in the Hebrew. It's the personal name of God which is only known amongst his people.

And Ruth attaches herself to Yahweh. So despite all the difficult circumstances of her life, she has come to know Yahweh.

She knows his name. This foreigner has somehow come into God's kingdom. Now the writer doesn't say it, but I think that he expects us to realise it.

[13:07] A foreigner has come amongst the people of God. A Moabites calls him by his personal name Yahweh. Now Israel's in a terrible state in the time of Judges.

And yet here is God continuing to be faithful to his promises that he made so long before to Abraham. God promised Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him.

And now in this one family during a time of national disaster, God has brought a Moabite woman named Ruth into his kingdom. And you see it especially, chapter 2, when Ruth says to Boaz, why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me a foreigner?

And Boaz says, I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband and how you left your father and mother and your homeland and you came to live with a people that you did not know before.

May the Lord, may Yahweh, repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

[14:37] It only just came to me, it's not in my notes, but the whole notion of coming to refuge in the Lord, the whole notion that somebody might come from outside our church family knowing nothing of God and come amongst us and find refuge in him by the beauty and the love of his people.

We bear a high responsibility in how we present ourselves to the outsider. And Ruth has taken refuge in the Lord and Moses spoke, if you go back in Exodus, Moses spoke about God being a refuge for his people in Deuteronomy chapter 32.

He said, the Lord's portion is his people and in a desert land he found him in a barren and howling waste and the Lord shielded him and cared for him.

He guarded him as the apple of his eye like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them in its pinions.

The Lord alone led him, no foreign God was with him. God is a God who is concerned for his people and God is a God who is concerned about outsiders.

[15:53] And Ruth comes and finds refuge and protection in the Lord. When I was in South Africa the other week I had the privilege of meeting Michael Cassidy on a number of occasions and one of those he was shuffling, he was jogging along the road, my friends were a bit unkind and said he was shuffling along the road, jogging and we stopped beside him, pulled up and had a conversation for a few minutes and he, a very funny man, he told us a few stories but one of the stories he said he was incensed, he went to his local church and the annual meeting they were carving up the budget, they were cutting the budget to mission and to outsiders and he stood up and he said the church is the only organisation in the world that exists for the benefit of non-members and he told me that he was greeted by an Antarctic frost.

Steve Jeffrey was talking to me the other day about Islam and you know sometimes we get in a flap and we worry about Islam and all the threat that it is to the world and you know what he said to me? It will never stop us preaching the gospel but we are fearful of losing our lives and our lifestyle.

We don't want to lose our stuff. You come into chapter 3 in Ruth and Ruth and there is a change of pace. Boaz has noticed and he has protected Ruth and Naomi notices Boaz's protection and his care and so in verse 9 or verse 11 Naomi says my daughter should I not try to find a home for you where you will be well provided for?

Is not Boaz with whose servant girls you have been a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor.

Wash and perfume yourself and put on your best clothes and then go down to the threshing floor but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking and when he lies down note the place where he is lying and then go and uncover his feet and lie down and he will tell you what to do.

[18:37] He sends it she sends him to a day spa. I think it's really hard to read this and not think sex. A woman beautifies herself perfume best clothes goes to a man alone who is alone in the middle of the night and goes to him alone uncovers his feet and lies down is that what you want your teenage girls to do with their boyfriends?

Do what he tells you. It sounds like Naomi is sending Ruth to Boaz to use her feminine charms to seduce him.

Ruth and Boaz both understand perceptions because she gets up and leaves at his instruction presumably while it's still dark in the morning before anybody can recognise them.

Those gay Hollywood gossipers on breakfast television would have a field day with this story. There is sex but not because they've slept together yet.

this is a love story which is full of tenderness and nobility and honour. Nothing sleazy in this story.

[20:22] Boaz is a near relative of Naomi's a kinsman redeemer a man under God's law in a society without social security a man who would have been required to bring protection to a widowed near relative.

And Ruth shows her willingness to come under his protection. She's willing to love and to trust this man and he's a normal man and he goes wow you'd marry me and he blesses her for not chasing younger men whether rich or poor.

Great story and Boaz recognises that there is a nearer relative that he must now deal with. So he gets his witnesses he tells the near relative that Naomi's lands for sale you can increase your empire you get first dibs you're a nearer relative than me and the other relative says I'll buy it and then Boaz very cannily says or points out that he doesn't just get the land you get the widow as well Ruth the foreigner to maintain the name of the dead with the property and a good looking deal suddenly doesn't look as attractive to him he doesn't want his own estate falling into the hands of a foreigner buy it yourself happy ending so verse 13 Boaz took Ruth she became his wife he went to her and the Lord enabled her to conceive and she gave birth to a son and then there's even more because the women said to Naomi verse 14 praise be to the

Lord who this day has not left you without a kinsman redeemer may he become famous throughout Israel he will renew your life and sustain you in your old age for your daughter in law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons has given him birth and then Naomi took the child laid him in her lap and cared for him and the women living there said Naomi has a son and they named him Obed he was the father of Jesse the father of David this then is the family line of Perez Perez was the father of Hezron Hezron the father of Ram Ram the father of Amminadab Amminadab the father of Nashon Nashon the father of Salmon Salmon the father of Boaz Boaz the father of Obed Obed the father of Jesse and Jesse the father of David what a mouthful thanks Ken this wonderfully tender story finishes with a genealogy what a way to finish a love story

Naomi's fortunes are reversed she has a son Obed his name means servant servant of the Lord the genealogy is tantalizing in itself simply put Boaz and Ruth are the great grandparents of David the son of Jesse and so the very last words of this love story tell us that Naomi is the great great grandmother of the great future king of Israel David and the writer here doesn't need to say the great future king like I just said he only has to mention the name David word and it resonates throughout the room because everybody knows immediately who he is talking about so we did history quickly we did literature quickly we've done bible over a fair bit longer and now we come to application and we ask the question what did all this mean to the original readers and then we want

to ask the question what does it mean to us and in some measure I've dealt with them both a bit even as I've been speaking but come back to the first question the original readers why you could ask the question why is

[ 24 : 55 ] Ruth in the bible and I think I would say to you I'm not sure what you said to one another what did you say to one another it's a bit unfair when I've already been preaching for 20 minutes or whatever so the genealogy so an outsider and the genealogy to David anybody else for anybody who can't hear Richard took us to the genealogy of

Jesus at the beginning of Matthew's gospel and drew the link to Ruth I'm not going to say more than that because I'm coming to that now no more questions you'll take my sermon away he did well I would say that this story is a crucial bridge between the dark days of the judges when we are continually told that in those days Israel had no king and each people each person did what was right in their own eyes and I think the story is saying to us that not everything was dark God was still king even though people were rejecting him as king and he was working his incredible purposes and promises out and even in darkness God was reaching out to people beyond Israel and bringing them under the protection of his wings even if his people weren't interested in the job God was doing it and

God was working even through foreigners to prepare the way for his king David and David was the king to whom God will promise an everlasting dynasty something that we've looked at in the course of this series Matthew's gospel Richard's right picks up on the significance of God keeping his promises when he opens with a genealogy which says a record of the coming to be of Jesus Christ the son of David the son of Abraham and so what he does he places the coming to be of Jesus Christ in direct line with the promises of God of kingship to David and of a blessing to the nations in Abraham Matthew quotes Ruth when he says in verse chapter 1 verse 5 this is Matthew's gospel Sammon the father of Boaz whose mother was Rahab Boaz the father of Obed whose mother was Ruth

Obed the father of Jesse and Jesse the father of King David Matthew's not subtle at all he won't sanitise the family history he proudly reminds his Jewish readership that a foreigner called Ruth stands firmly in the family history of King David and of God's eternal King Jesus Christ himself at a human level Ruth is a story of lives lived by faith even in the face of terrible bitterness real tragedy struck Naomi and her family you don't have to minimise it calling herself Mara or bitterness was a true reflection of her circumstances there was no fresh word from God for her life seemed over she and her family faced ruin and despair not everybody who sits amongst us this morning is enjoying life at the moment and a word from God may feel very distant but Naomi still had faith in God despite feeling bitter with him for what he had given to her and what does stand out is the constancy of faith in Yahweh in Ruth in particular attached herself to Naomi attached herself to the Lord her hope in God is maintained despite his apparent silence and perhaps that's one of the places where this story particularly comes home for us we live by faith in the promises of God our biggest hope is in God's ability to raise the dead our hope is firmly rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and because God has raised him we can face death with the hope that God can raise us to eternal life God is faithful at every place in the scriptures in keeping his promises even through the darkest days so Ruth is a story of living by faith through dark and unrelenting days even when God seems strangely quiet he is absolutely working his purposes out his graciousness to this family is shown in his complete reversal of their fortunes not something that he promises this side of heaven but in this story he does do it so brothers and sisters

[ 31 : 05 ] I would say to you that no matter how difficult life for you is at present no matter how bitter the circumstances of your life may seem to be no matter how impossible the future may appear I want to say that God is absolutely to be trusted he may not reverse your circumstances this side of heaven but he is absolutely faithful hope in him is not futile and persistent faith will know great reward in faith we cling to his promises and we join to Paul the writer of Romans and we say knowing all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us for I am convinced that neither death nor life neither angels nor demons neither the present nor the future nor any powers neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of

God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord Amen