

Ruth 1:16

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Date: 02 December 2012

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[0 : 01] Now, while the book of Ruth, a very short book, just four chapters, while there is tragedy and sorrow and sadness in it, it's also quite a wonderful story that highlights, even in the pain and the sorrow, something of God's overruling and God's great care and God's protection, even of his people, and of how God can take a bad situation and out of it work something that is really good.

It's also a story that shows us something of what it is for a person who's completely outside a Christian community to be influenced in such a way that they come to embrace the Christian faith.

And it's no doubt, whatever, that God introduced himself to Ruth through his own covenant people. And God still works like that.

And many a person has found that the first stirring, the first way in which their heart has been touched in any way or affected or influenced in any way regarding the Christian faith has come about through the influence of a person.

It might be in the home. It could be the influence of a granny or a parent or a brother or a sister or a son or a daughter. It might be somebody at work.

[1 : 39] It might be a neighbor. It might be just somebody that you have met. It could be at school. But there's something about that person that has affected, that has influenced, that has touched your life and has begun to make you think.

And maybe you're here today as a Christian and when you look back in your life, you realize that's where it all began. Through the impact, through the influence of another Christian, there was something about them that drew you, something about them that affected you, something about them that touched your heart, touched your life.

And you can trace your beginning to seek the Lord and to seek to find out more about the Christian faith through the influence of that one person.

And that happens so often. And I'm sure we can all look back at people, at Christians, who influenced our lives before ever we started to seek the Lord.

But you know that we sometimes maybe forget the influence and forget the impression that can be made upon people.

[2 : 54] Because as the Word of God, one of the descriptions that it gives of a Christian is that you're living epistles or living letters read by all men.

Your life, my life is being read by people. It's actually a very solemn and a very searching thought. That our lives are being read for either good or bad.

Living epistles read by all men. People will make their assessment, their judgment of Christ and Christianity through you.

If you today are a Christian and are known as a Christian, somebody who has come out on the Lord's side, somebody who has declared that you're a Christian, people are going to make a judgment and an assessment of Christ and Christianity by you.

It's quite a challenging thought. But that's what the Word of God is saying, that we're living epistles, living letters, read, read of all men. So that people are making this assessment regarding Jesus and the gospel with regard to who or what we are.

[4 : 11] Now as we say, the book of Ruth shines out from a very black period in the history of Israel. This was the time of the Judges. And at the beginning of the book of Judges, it tells us this.

It was a time when people did everything that was right in their own eyes. Every person did that which was right in their own eyes. In other words, people did what they wanted. People, it didn't matter what other people thought.

If this is something I want to do, I will do it. It's like an anthem from the 60s. It's my life and I'll do what I want. That's kind of the way it was in the time of the Judges, where everybody did just what he wanted or she wanted.

And it's quite amazing because we've got to think back and remember that at the end of the book of Joshua, we find Joshua and the people of Israel making a covenant before God.

And they were so determined to follow the Lord and they were in their new land and they were filled with a sense of indebtedness to God. And it was like saying, right, forevermore, we are going to serve the Lord.

[5 : 18] And Joshua is so aware of how fickle people and how changeable people are. And he's saying to them, look, you don't realize right now this is the way you feel.

But it can change so quickly. And within a generation or two, you can lose it. Joshua was aware of that. And that's precisely what happened.

As long as the older generation were there, the influence of following the Lord was strong. But then the next generation, it became less. And then into the next generation, it became even less.

And you know, history repeats itself over and over. And I think it's so important that we seek to hand over the amazing legacy that we have of the Christian faith, the influence, the impact, the vitality, the reality of it.

So that we hold on to it and appreciate it for what it is. And that we seek that our children and their children will enjoy the blessings and privileges that we've had.

[6 : 30] But unfortunately, that's not what happened in Israel. They began to follow other gods. There was a tendency within their hearts towards idolatry.

And there is a tendency within the human heart towards idolatry. Because you see, there's a spiritual nature in man, whether we accept it or not.

And we have to worship something or somebody. Whether it's our shells or whether it's some system or philosophy of life. Or whether we worship people or whatever.

That we are made to worship. That's part and partial. And there's so many people, many people who are even atheistic. And yet they're still worshipping. They're worshipping some system. You can even worship atheism.

You can worship whatever philosophy. But it is something deep rooted within people where we are made for worship. And there is never the fulfillment and satisfaction within our heart or life unless we really worship the living and through God.

[7 : 40] But Israel, remember, are God's covenant people. He has entered into covenant with them. And they've forsaken them. They've turned their back and they're away in another direction. They're worshipping other gods.

And God allows calamity to come upon them. And that's the way God deals. Because, you see, God speaks to us in his word.

And if we won't listen to his word. You see, he said, God has made us for fellowship, for togetherness. God wants us to interact with him.

God wants us to be speaking to him. He wants to speak to us and for us to hear him. But if we're not listening, if we don't hear his word, if we don't speak to him, then he's going to have to do something in order to bring us back to him so that we will begin to talk to him again.

And to cry out to him again. And to speak to him again. And that's what he did with Israel. And one of the ways in which he worked, or one of the ways, things that he allowed was he allowed famine.

[8 : 55] Excuse me. Famine to come into the land. And we're told that in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And then we come to the introduction here of this family of Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons, Malan and Chilion.

Now, although God overruled everything, and at the end of the day, although there was a lot of tragedy and sadness, God turns everything around for Naomi in the end.

If we read right through the four chapters, and I'm sure you're familiar with it, if you aren't, when you go home, read it. It's a wonderful story. God blessed the latter end of Naomi.

Many great blessings came into her life. Although when she came back from Moab, she said, don't call me Naomi, call me Mara. She was a broken-hearted, dispirited, sad woman.

But the Lord in turn turned her sadness into joy. Now, while there was famine in the land, we find that Naomi and Elimelech made a decision.

[10 : 05] And their decision was to go to Moab. And they thought, right, there's famine here. Now, from a human point of view, from a parental point of view, you can understand their decision.

And the decision was very simple. So, here we are, here we are in Bethlehem. There's no food. Probably there was a drought.

And there would be no crops. And they weren't able to have bread or anything like that. So, here we are. We're facing a famine. We've got a family. Best thing for us to do is just to head over to Moab.

Because there's food there. Now, as we say, from an economic point of view, from a family point of view, from a human point of view, you can say, I understand that decision. But the other side of the coin is this.

Here is this family. And we've got to remember that they are God's covenant people. And God is at work with his people. And he's at work by way of discipline.

[11 : 12] And, you know, when God is dealing with us, whether it's in love or in discipline, and his discipline, remember, is in love. When God is dealing with us, we mustn't run away from that.

We may think, ah, but I don't like. And nobody likes discipline. We don't like being disciplined. And remember it when you're a child. Nobody, whether it was in the home or in the school, nobody liked discipline.

But it's important, it's vital for the development and for the instruction of somebody as they grow up. And God is disciplining his people.

So this family decide to run away from the discipline. And that's where they made the mistake. And the added mistake was going to Moab because there were two countries or two nations that God had said to his covenant people, don't seek their peace or their prosperity.

One was the Ammonites and the other was the Moabites. So we find that this family are going into a particular nation that God is saying have no dealings with this nation.

[12 : 25] This is a nation, I don't want you, seeking their peace or their prosperity. So when you look at it at one level, you can see that there is a, what Elimelech and Naomi did was wrong.

They should have stayed and submitted under God's judgment and humbled themselves because there were so many promises in God's word that if God's people would humble themselves and they would go back to seek his face and repent of their sin, that God would hear them and he would heal their land.

But they didn't, they went away. And of course we see what happens. They went away to the land of Moab. And initially obviously things went well, but then tragedy occurred because first Elimelech died and then the two sons, they married, but tragically they died also.

And so we find Naomi in an awful situation. If you can try and picture how it was for her. Here she is in a foreign land. And obviously we've got to remember that it wasn't the way we are today where travel is so easy and where we're able to cross different cultures and backgrounds so easily and integrate and there are so many things where we're, in fact they talk about the world today as a global village.

Well it certainly wasn't in these days. And so she finds herself in a foreign place and all as it were on her own, apart from her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah.

[14 : 10] Now as we can see very clearly, they were lovely girls. There's no question whatever. And very committed to the well-being of their mother-in-law. But here she is in this awful situation.

But it tells us in verse 6, Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food or given them bread.

In fact, the very name Bethlehem means the house of bread. And there's a lot of, you'd buy a whole sermon in that when you think that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Jesus who is the bread of life. He is the one, God's provision for this world. He is the one who came into this world to give us life, to give us sustenance, to give us nourishment, to give us feeding, to give us hope in this world.

So it's quite interesting that the very name Bethlehem is the house of bread. So once again, the news filters back, even across over to Moab, that the famine is over.

[15 : 27] And that God has visited, obviously, the work has been done, and the people of God have started to call upon the name of the Lord again. No doubt the Lord has sent rain, and crops have grown, and so there's bread.

And so this is a word that comes, and Naomi, she says, I have to go back. Now she doesn't go back simply because of her food. She has food in Moab.

But she has to go back. Because, as you look at Naomi there, she's saying to herself, I need to get back.

I don't belong here. It wasn't just the culture. It wasn't just the people. I believe at the very depth of it all, it was the whole religious way.

She couldn't, living in a land of idolatry. The word was that God was back with his people, his covenant people, and Naomi had to get back.

[16 : 27] And you know what, when you read that, you see something of the prodigal, just like the prodigal son. Remember how the prodigal son, he was fed up living with the father. It was dull, it was boring, it was restrictive.

He wanted a way. He wanted a way to enjoy life. He wanted the freedom, and the liberties, and to do what he wanted to do. And we know the story.

He got what he wanted, but it wasn't long until he wanted back to the father. When he reached the end of himself, and he began to think of how it was at home, he realized it wasn't boring, it wasn't restrictive.

And at home, as it was held out before his eyes, in his need, and he says, I will arise. And I will go to my father.

And I think there's something of that in Naomi as well, where she is rising up, and she's returning home. She's going back. She needs to get back. Is there anybody here like that today?

[17 : 30] Is there anybody here who needs to get back? You've wondered. You know in your heart. Other people might not know, but you know it's not as it used to be.

That you've drifted, you've wandered. You're not where you should be. You're not even where you want to be. You need to get back.

And you know that there might be a struggle to get back. That it might not just happen like that, but you know, the most important thing is the desire to get back.

Follow that desire. And my friend, the Lord, there's nothing that the Lord wants more than to see you in the depth of your heart saying, I need to get back.

And he will help you to come back. Well, that's what Naomi does. Naomi goes back. And her daughters-in-law go with her. But Naomi says to her daughters-in-law, we see that.

[18 : 27] She said to them, right, she's really saying, if we were to paraphrase it, she's telling them she loves them. She is thanking them for all that they've done for her.

And she recognizes that these are two wonderful girls who are so committed to her. And there's no doubt but that she's acknowledging all this.

But there's so much sadness in her heart. And she says to the daughters-in-law, you know, Naomi feels responsible for what's happened. And she's saying, I feel for you.

And so she's encouraging. And there's an awful lot we could, but we're just moving on quickly that we could see. And then we come to this most moving of scenes where in verse 14, then they lifted up their voices and wept again.

And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And you have this picture here of the three women huddled together, arms locked around each other, and they're weeping.

[19 : 35] They're kind. They've been through so much together. And when people go through difficulties together, it kind of binds them together. And Naomi is saying to the girls, look, you go back.

There's nothing for you in Israel. You have no rights. You have no privileges. You'll be open to racism.

You'll be violated, and there'll be nobody to help you. Life will be dangerous for you there. You are Moabites, girls. Just go back to your own ways, your own people, your everything.

They were clinging on. But then we find one of the daughters-in-law, Orpah. We find that it tells us about her that they lifted up their voices and wept again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law.

In other words, this was a farewell kiss. And verse 15, and mother-in-law, see, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. If we could look in on that moment of the three of them huddled together, the two girls are making a decision at that particular point, and their decisions couldn't be further apart.

[20 : 50] On the one hand, Orpah is thinking in her mind, and the pull of her culture and her background and her ways and her religion and her people is so strong.

that she says, that's it, I'm going back. I have to go back. And away she goes. But Ruth clung.

Ruth wouldn't let go. And we know why Ruth won't let go. She tells us in a minute why she won't let go. And you see, Ruth has made up her mind that she is going with her mother-in-law, come what may, doesn't matter what the future holds.

She has identified herself with the people of Israel. She has obviously come to embrace the covenant God. And she is heart and soul in this.

And she knows it's going to be difficult. But that doesn't come into the judgment she makes. Whatever the future is, she has thrown her lot in entirely with God's people.

[22 : 07] And Jesus tells us that in becoming a Christian we have to count the cost. Because on the one hand while the Christian faith is full of so many blessings and privileges, there's also a cost in it.

Jesus says we have to take up our cross, we have to deny ourselves, and we're to follow him. Nobody wants a cross. The last thing we want to do is to deny ourselves.

And following Jesus at times can be costly. But that's the issue. And Jesus says we've got to count the cost. And Ruth and Orpah both counted the cost.

For Orpah the cost was too much. And she says I have to go back. I'm not prepared for what's ahead. The cost is too much.

But Ruth on the other hand says I have counted the cost. And I'm ready I'm throwing in my lot. Can I ask you a question?

[23 : 14] Are you a Ruth or an Orpah? Are you somebody who is ready or has already thrown in your lot with the people of God?

You're somebody who has given your life to Jesus. And you're following him come what may. Or are you somebody who says you know I wouldn't mind being a Christian but you've started to count the cost and you're beginning to look at this and that and the next thing and you're saying oh man what will happen if I become a Christian?

There are issues and things that you haven't sorted out and you're saying I'm not ready. I'm not ready. My friend are you ready to die?

That's an important question. You make sure that you're right with Jesus. Well Orpah makes this wonderful wonderful decision. And so we find that Ruth says do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you.

From where you go I will go and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. We find here that Ruth has come obviously to faith and she's making this declaration the twofold declaration one that God is her God and the people of God are her people and the two go together.

[24 : 46] We know that's what the Bible says that we've passed from death to life because we love the brothers and the sisters. There is a bonding and there has to be a bonding because it's family.

See when a person becomes a Christian that's what happens you become part of a family just as in the natural family there is a bond between brothers and sisters and parents and there's this bond and so it is in the family of God.

It doesn't matter your background that's how there's an immediate identification it doesn't matter your background it doesn't matter what your culture it doesn't matter where you're from or what as a Christian there's a bond that because you belong at the end of the day it's one family and so Ruth has identified and so we find Ruth has integrated herself in amongst the people of God and you know it's wonderful the way that God blessed the latter end because a commitment to God is never wasted here's this woman Ruth a Moabitess she comes she sacrifices at a one level sacrifices everything but you know we never sacrifice to the Lord in vain because the Lord blessed Ruth Ruth married when she got into Israel it's a wonderful story we know how she ended up marrying Boaz and they had a child Obed

Obed had a son Jesse Jesse had a son David so the great granny of King David is this woman Ruth isn't that extraordinary and it's here we see how God rules and overrules everything for good although there was a period in Naomi's life where it was so bitter and it was so painful yet in her old age she could see how the Lord had actually worked and it's a wonderful thing to commit to the Lord and today a family here are committing the bringing up of their child into the Christian faith and there is nothing greater that we could do it is an outward act of where we are saying that we're seeking the covenant blessing of God to be upon this child and there is nowhere greater that we can bring up our children than in the sphere of the

Christian church and I hope that everybody here personally today has submitted their life under the rule and under the authority of King Jesus if you haven't I would urge you even in the quietness of your own heart to ask the Lord to come in and be king and ruler in your heart let us pray Lord our God we ask to bless us now and do us good we give thanks for every blessing that we receive grant us grace in the remainder of our service to continue to look to your share take away from us all our sins in Jesus name Amen