

God's Priorities

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] I want to turn back to the book of Ruth this morning and to chapter 4 and the last section. It's the very last section of the book, so it should end well because it's a great love story and it does end well and there's nothing worse than a bad ending.

We like good endings. I think we are hardwired for good endings. We're not so keen when we go to see a film or read a book and it's a bad ending.

It kind of leaves you unsatisfied. It leaves you just wishing that there had been a good ending and sometimes that's just wishful filming. Sometimes that's just because we would love to see that and it can be for us unrealistic.

But as we saw last week, this is a great picture of really all the work of God throughout the whole Bible. It's in seed form, it's kind of condensed into the book of Ruth because it's dealing with people and God and our relationship with God and His redemption.

So the whole thing is really about redemption and rescue and returning if we want to use these words. But you know, we can tell a lot about somebody, we can tell a lot about somebody by what's important to them, can't we?

[1 : 2 8] We can usually tell by someone's diary what's important to them or possibly by their bank account, by what they spend their money on or by the kind of house they have.

Do you ever go into people's houses and you're going to wonder what kind of people they are by the house they've got or by their living room or by their kitchen or whatever it might be. It might be their bookcase, what kind of people they are by the books they have and you can tell quite a lot about someone with these things.

And here in the book of Ruth, we can tell a lot about God in this book because it's given to us by God. And it tells us a great deal about what God's priorities are, what's important to God.

Now I think we need to listen to that in our lives, all of us as made in God's image as needing rescued by God or having been rescued by God into relationship with Him.

Is it not important to know what's important for the most important person in the universe? Or the person that made us that we will one day face the God who is eternal?

[2 : 4 1] Is it not significant for us to really consider what's important for us? We often choose what's important or what we think is important in God's eyes and it's usually us.

We are really important. But ultimately, this book helps us to understand what is very important to God and if it's important to God, then it ought to be important for us in our spiritual lives and in our ongoing lives as we think about Him.

And I hope it's encouraging for you. It certainly was encouraging for me. And I guess there'll be a bit of repetition as we think over the book, scan over it and then focus on this last section.

I've got four things from this book that reveal to us what are important to God. The things that are important to God. By the way, if you had just five minutes to jot down what you thought were the four things in this book.

Well, the first thing I've got is ordinary people. Ordinary people are important to God. I think that comes across very clearly in this book and also in the passage that Cori read from in 1 Corinthians.

[3 : 56] It's a great passage, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not to bring to nothing the things that are ordinary people.

That's what that passage is all about. It's saying that the people that are important and significant and influential and powerful and rich in this world don't turn God's head.

It's not saying that they don't matter to God, but these things don't turn God's head. And so ordinary people are important. And Ruth is a classic example of that.

Ruth in history is a classic example of ordinary people mattering to God because she wasn't a great inventor. There's nothing named after her. She didn't do anything great and significant nationally.

She wasn't rich. She wasn't a political leader. She wasn't influential at any philosophical level. She isn't remembered generally, but we see her here.

[4 : 59] She's a widow. She's a daughter. She's a mother-in-law and she's a lover. We can all associate with these things. Well, we can't all associate with being a daughter-in-law, but you know what I mean.

They are ordinary everyday things and she's very ordinary. She's also an outsider in her ordinariness and God reveals that this is important to him culturally, religiously, socially.

She was an outsider. She didn't fit into the mold. She was a different person from the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people of her day, but yet God chose this ordinary person and she was an ordinary person who also needed rescuing.

I think we see that clearly through the book and that's very much the theme, isn't it? That she needed both physically rescued from her rather unfortunate and unhelpful situation, but also spiritually she came to recognise that she needed a saviour.

She needed a redeemer. Go back to chapter 2 and verse 12 where these great words that Boaz speaks of her. He says, you will get your reward given to the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

[6 : 20] That's a conversion testimony. That's a sentence that speaks of her having come to God to be her redeemer, to be her rescuer, spiritually to forgive her sins.

This ordinary person goes against all the kind of advice that she could have been given, all the natural wisdom of the day and as this ordinary person she puts her trust in the Lord Jesus Christ although she didn't know him at that point, but God as her redeemer and her saviour and she is blessed and she has a future and she belongs as we come to recognise and know in this story.

Now over the last number of months we've as a people been asked to be, not as a congregation, I mean just generally the nation has been asked to associate with different things.

We are Charlie, has been one of them and there's been various, various we are's. I can honestly say we are Ruth. We are Ruth.

That's what we are today because the Gospel and what's important to God is that he comes to ordinary people. We are blinding in our ordinariness, according to the world in which we live.

[7 : 40] We are poor, often powerless and we are needing rescued. But that is the Gospel that we have for our society as well.

For those who sense and smell the fumes of hell more so than we do in this world and there's many people who do. We are very privileged and we have many things to give thanks for.

But for ordinary lost people the Gospel is for them and it's for us. It's for us even if in this world we have a privileged standing and we are doing well and even courted by the world if we must come to the place where we recognise God's head is not turned by that.

He's not turned by our wealth or by our influence or by our being nice. You know? We are all nice. But that doesn't turn his head.

He isn't impressed by our CV or by our mortgage or by our career because he sees our hearts and every single person, whether it's the richest person in the world or it's just an ordinary person by the world standards must come to recognise and see our need of rescue and the ordinariness and level playing field between all of us in God's eyes.

[8 : 59] And in all our niceness, another word, we remember that today God sees our pride and our lust and our independence and our selfishness and if you're not a Christian, your need for rescue.

Your need for rescue. And that's the message that we believe and the message that we want to share as well. That ordinary people are important to God, hugely important to God.

And that's good for us, isn't it? It's good for us to remember that because we are people who, like Ruth, are unremarkable. We can sometimes be outsiders and we are definitely those who need rescue.

And so he comes to ordinary people. That's one thing that's very important. I think the second thing that comes across very much from this book and will come to the end of the story shortly as part of this is he's interested in returning people.

Now remember we've said quite a lot that the number of words that are repeated sometimes in a chapter of a book reflects either a theme or something that God wants us to remember.

[10 : 14] And well, the book of Ruth is full of that word. It's translated differently in the English, but it's all about returning. It's all about coming back to God. And that's hugely important.

And in verse 15, the woman bless Naomi and says, he shall be to you a restorer of life. That's the same word, a returner of life.

And it just fits in like a jigsaw with all the theme of returning to God. And that's the theme of the book. If we talk about the book of Ruth, we've said before it could be the book of Naomi because it's really not only about Ruth's rescue, but it's about Naomi's return.

We've seen that she was emptied, but in order to be filled. And we've seen that God's covenant love for her as an individual takes her through darkness and through questions and through bitterness to that place where she becomes full and strong and provided for.

And that's the end of the story that we looked at today, her daughter-in-law is married, her daughter-in-law has a son. The women of the town basically say that the son is Naomi's, not Ruth's, because that is so important in the culture, the inheritance and the family and the covenant and the name being continued.

[11 : 37] And she is given this great purpose in life. She becomes a nanny for this child that she thought she had no hope for and no opportunity of knowing. And she has provision in him as the women say that he will be one who will nourish you in your old age and look after you in your old age.

So there's future provision both physically and also we know spiritually as she returns to the Lord. And that's a great thing that there's this block she sees.

She sees what is it? She sees the covenant love and I'll come on to that. The covenant love of God. Even when there's bitterness, even when there's darkness, even when she feels empty, she sees God all the time has actually is taking her to this point of return.

That is, I don't know, what's the percentage of Christians in this congregation? I don't know, it's probably about 90% or something like that. But that is what's important to God, that we are returners.

And it's not just a one-off thing. It's something that I do and you must do all of our lives. It's a direction of life that we are people who keep turning away from God in our lives.

[12 : 53] We keep becoming independent. We keep closing the Bible. We keep stop praying. We stop praying. And there's this constant need for repentance for returning to God.

And the theme of the book is very much that and that therefore is important to God. I'm really scared of, I'm scared in my own life and I'm scared for the congregation that we become Christians who are in a rut.

You know that we just go through the motions, we do our things that we do. We come to church, we listen, we ignore, we go home, we don't ignore, whatever it might be and we're in a rut and we're stuck.

Not growing, not developing, not blossoming, not returning and you know that's the easiest thing to do, isn't it? We're not asked to grow in our own strength or to somehow be superhuman or be super spiritual.

All that we're asked is to be like Naomi, like the prodigal son who comes to his senses and recognizes that his hope, his future, his blessing, her hope, her future's blessing is just in returning to God.

[13 : 59] As Christians, many Christians go through stages of being embittered, of being broken, of being empty, of feeling God has abandoned them. Naomi went through all of these things and I know there's people here going through that as well.

And what we're reminded of here is God saying, I love returners and this is the kind of end of the story for returners. It's one of blessing, one of ultimate blessing, one of future blessing, one where my he said, my love, my covenant love will be revealed to you.

He wants us to come to our spiritual senses in our lives and recognize that in our lives, the difficulties, the battles, the loneliness we sometimes feel is not the end of the story with him.

He's promised not to let go and he will keep us and he will show us his love. What matters to God is, if we're wandering sheep, that matters to God.

Your prayerlessness and my prayerlessness, that matters. The fact that we don't speak to him, it matters. Our distance from him spiritually, that we close our ears to his voice, that matters to him.

[15 : 10] When we live practically as if we are atheists, that matters to him because he wants us to be returners, he wants us to be in relationship with him.

That's why he gives us this boot because it shows us from beginning to end the story of someone who went through all these emotions and then who came back to God and who had his love poured out into their hearts and into their lives.

Naomi's that picture for us as we've seen in this story. He wants us to recognize that and as not to be strangers to him.

Don't be a stranger. You may be professed Jesus Christ as your Savior 30 years ago, it might have been 10 years ago, I don't know. Don't lean on that.

Don't be culturally a Christian. God forbid. But be in that relationship. It doesn't need, we're ordinary. God says that.

[16 : 07] He says we're ordinary. We don't need to be special people to return. We don't need to be super holy. We don't need to be doing everything right. We don't need to have a tick box completed before we return.

He says, I'll come back with all your brokenness and with all your struggle and doubt and fear because that is important to me. That comes through the whole of the Bible and it comes through very clearly in the story of Naomi.

Ruth is rescued. She comes to faith. Naomi is returning to faith. These are really important aspects. And these two things should always kind of be fused with what matters to us in the church.

You know, St. Columba's, what matters to St. Columba's, what matters is people being rescued, people being redeemed, people being saved, our friends, our family members, our colleagues, that we want to tell them that Jesus is a Christ for ordinary people and He wants us to return.

And as believers, we are actively engaged in being returners. That's what He wants, that we take time to return and recognise and see Him in His grace.

[17 : 16] The third thing is His covenant love. That's hugely significant, hugely important. It's the word, He said, that Hebrew word, the last word that very often the English Bible translated, as I've said before, blah, blah, blah.

His covenant love, okay, His special love, His loyal love, it's of course the theme of the whole Bible from the beginning to the end. He loved in creation and then He loved even when people rebelled by promising the Redeemer who would come.

And He has loved right through the Old Testament in preparing that and then He's loved in the coming of Jesus Christ, the theme of the whole world, His love into a broken, hellbound, lost and estranged world from.

And that's the story of the Bible. That's the theme, that's the theme of Ruth, His redeeming love. We've seen that, Boaz is a great example of that.

Now what I want to do just very briefly is not talk about the love of Jesus Christ or the love of God. We've talked about that a lot in this. But I want to talk briefly about how that love should be also our love, that this covenant love, this hesed love as a people, as a community should be ours and we see it reflected in Ruth who is a believer, who's a new creation, who has been born again, who's been renewed by the Holy Spirit in her life and who's an Old Testament believer.

[18 : 41] But she reflects this kind of love in her life. If you go back to chapter one, her very early confession when Naomi tells her to go back home to Moab, she says, do you know how it's me to leave you or go from following you for where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, your God, my God, where you die, I will die and there I will be buried.

Covenant love, loyal love. And then in this passage we read at the end of the book in chapter four, she's recognised for her great love to Naomi again, it says in the blessing, he shall be to you a store of life and nourishing you old age for your daughter in law Ruth who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons.

Now that is speaking about how important covenant love is to God. You know, it doesn't mean that much for us, but in the ancient Neerys to talk about a daughter being worth more than seven sons, with the son being the kind of, you know, to which the inheritance would flow, it was a remarkable thing to say, and seven of course biblically often being parallel with perfection and basically God is saying Ruth's love is perfect.

It doesn't mean that it's without flaw, but in his eyes the grace that he has given her and the way she outworks that in Naomi or mother-in-law's life, loyal love, sacrificial obedient love is perfect, it's committed to those who are closest to us, committed to God and his covenant.

It's an influence for good Ruth in this story, it's an influence for good in Naomi and in Boaz's life and in the women of the community and in the elders of the community, see her, see her life and her witness, her hesed, her covenant love is something that stands out because she's a believer.

[20 : 39] Now we go to weddings all over the place and they always read 1 Corinthians 13, but let's not sentimentalise 1 Corinthians 13, the passage about love, because it ends up saying faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.

Do we forget that sometimes? Do we forget that? That the greatest in God's eyes, that what's important to God is that we as believers, and I'm speaking here about us reflecting the love that's been shown to us in Christ, that we reflect that in our lives, it's His gift to us.

You weren't born with it, we don't have it naturally, we all have natural love for family and friends, but this is grace, this is a gift, this is covenant love, this is loyal love and it comes from a new heart that God gives.

Our heart of stone has been changed into a hearth flesh and it enables us to love God and love one another the way God loves us. What does that mean, it means that we're going to forgive 70 times 7?

High horses. We're always getting on our high horses when people let us down and we always justify ourselves and we always think we're so great, they're so bad. That's not covenant love.

[21 : 52] Covenant love takes us off our high horses and enables us to walk in humility and say, I forgive because I've been forgiven a hundred thousand times myself by the living God.

It's love for the outsider, it's love for those that we wouldn't actually be alongside, it's love for the Christian community. With all our faults and failings and weaknesses, it's love that we put into practice, we value others and that's hugely significant for us and I think that's hugely important for us as a church.

And again, you've caught me at a time when I've got lots of struggles and I'm struggling with the concepts of church and programs and doing things as churches and feeling that everyone needs to be served and that we're only at a stage where if we make a mistake it will be knocked flat and the church is only about coming on a Sunday to listen to sermons in a nice new building and just being nice to each other.

And yet how can you program, how can you put into practice, hissed covenant love in programs? How can you do it by gathering together in communities and organising things in a formal way?

Surely a good church for us must be where each of us is taking responsibility to so hissed and you know the only way you can do it is by being prayerful because it doesn't come naturally.

[23 : 36] It has to be in relationship with God from our heart, that as a heart people we are organically living out this life. Now obviously there are things need to organise, the bigger we get I don't deny that.

You can't put hissed, you can't put God's covenant love in a five year plan, it simply doesn't work like that. And we have to serve God and take responsibility to do it ourselves.

Don't sit back and wait all the time for someone to tell you to do something. How can a minister tell you to love? We can't do it because we're struggling ourselves with it.

It's something we simply take on board when we see and know and understand how ordinary and how much in need of rescue and returning we are ourselves. It gives us Christ's eyes.

It gives us Christ's forgiveness and Christ's long suffering and Christ's sacrifice and Christ's obedience because he says that this covenant love, if you love me you will obey me and that takes us all the way out of our comfort zone into a place where we serve him and we serve other people before even thinking about ourselves.

[24 : 54] And therefore I link that with this corporate prayer. It seems to be unpopular today corporate prayer but I think as a congregation if we are to live out this covenant love, if we are to influence other people for good throughout the congregation, you know, be like Ruth was in lowan, if we are to spiritually be good for people, if we are to help other people spiritually by being a good example and if we are to do these realities in our lives then I can't believe we can do it without praying and I can't believe that the engine room isn't the most important meeting that we have, the meeting where we are corporately praying to be a kind of people that God wants us to be because these things are important to him.

Building, I don't think that's important to God but it's nice. But what we are because we are the building, we are the people and what we are with one another reflects Jesus Christ.

And what we are with our children, you know, this is a great story about covenant love and about inheritance and about future and about blessing and about how this child would be a blessing to Naomi that he would display covenant love and of course it goes on to speak about David, the great king.

And we've got lots of children here, very small children and bigger children. And most of you here, if you're not visiting or if you're not new, you've vowed to pray for and to be a good example to these children when they were baptized.

So remember that, remember the great and what a day in generation to be bringing up children in. What a great need to pray, to be praying together for our children and for the covenant community that they will grow up in.

[26 : 47] May it not be a place where they find judgment and rejection and people turn their back on them. So covenant love and the last thing very briefly is in terms of what's important to God, ordinariness and a returning people and his covenant love and also his sovereign plan.

You can't get away from Ruth without recognizing this is a God who is absolutely and completely in control and he is working at a sovereign plan. This is a matrix as it were that you could place on top of the whole Bible which tells us that God is working out his plan and he is protecting the seed of the woman from Genesis 3 right through to the coming of Jesus Christ.

The genealogy reminds us of that at the end where we have all these names and it's a genealogy which comes before Ruth's birth and goes after Ruth's death and it's one that you could take and you could lift into Matthew because it fits into the genealogy of Jesus so that Ruth and her forebears and her those who come after her are part of the genealogy of Jesus Christ through King David of course is which it gets to here.

And there we're reminded that God is working out his plan. The story of the seed which the serpent would crush is protected throughout the hundreds of years of the Old Testament to the coming of Jesus right up to the birth of Jesus and the destruction of the young men after the birth of Jesus.

All this spiritual battle to destroy the seed and to destroy the coming of the Redeemer. And that sovereign plan which we have in kind of seed form in Ruth is a reminder to us that we've got the end of the end of the story we have and none of us are at the end of our story.

[29 : 01] Ruth and Naomi didn't know the end of their story when they went through it. And we need to remember that in the dark, particularly in the darkness, particularly in the bitterness, particularly when we were struggling in our lives and who went through more darkness than Jesus Christ himself on the cross.

Yet that wasn't the end of the story because we have resurrection and life and here we've got returning and blessing. That's what we need to know that in God's sovereign plan it's a story of blessing and life and resurrection and hope and a future in this life and eternally.

And that sovereignty of God is a great comfort to us. It's a great mystery. Surely it is a great mystery. No one's pretending to have all the answers.

But it's a wonderful comfort to us that God is a good purpose and a good plan even through the darkness you may be going through as a believer. Just in him because it ought to as we recognize it for us lead to awe and worship.

You see that's what the women ended up doing in this section. Then the women said, blessed be the Lord or praise to the Lord who has not left you this day without a redeemer. May his name be praised or renowned in his room.

[30 : 18] So the response to God's sovereign purpose and God working in ordinary lives like yours and mine is awe and worship and that should be our response isn't it?

To the work of God. We see the hand of God in Naomi's and Ruth's life and we worship. The women here who are spoken of probably have moved from a place of judgment to a place of worship.

You know when Naomi came back they went, here's Naomi. Look what the cat brought him back from Moab. Naomi who left us all when we were in famine and now she's back.

There may have been a bit of that but that has changed to worship and praise in God for the way he has dealt in compassion and love and in grace with her.

And our lives are intended as we return to God to take us to that place of worship. That's one of the reasons we come at worship because over this last week you'll have seen God's hand, you'll have recognized mystery and darkness that you don't know how it's going to end.

[31 : 28] We don't judge because it's not the end of the story but we come today to worship because he knows. And we entrust ourselves to this redeeming resurrected ascended Savior who is living and through whom the nations of the world bow and will bow in his sovereign grace.

So our worship as a church reflects our lives doesn't it? It reflects the kind of lives we're living. It's not a top up.

It's not just a jag, an injection of spirituality that will keep us going. It's to be reflecting how we've returned and how we understand the sovereign purposes and love and grace.

And I hope and pray that that will be the case. And I hope and pray that we can pray about that to be the case because I can't work up. You can't work up. We can't do anything in our own strength.

It's about being returners. That's the simple beauty of the Gospel. That's all he wants. He just wants us to return. You know how it is in family, if there's division, if there's problems, if there's difficulty, there's in relationships, nothing's right until you seek forgiveness and come back.

[32 : 46] And that's what we seek in our lives spiritually. And I hope that's what we've learned from the story of Ruth. Ordinary people are important to God, returning people, his covenant love and his sovereign plan.

It's all hugely important to God and I hope therefore important to us. That's power, heads and pray. Father God, we come before you and seek your blessing and your help as we move on from this amazing book of Ruth.

We thank you that it's a living word. We thank you that it speaks of the power of God and what is important to God. That could be no other reason for including a book about two women on a journey in their loss, in their bereavement, in their emptiness, in their bitterness, returning to their roots and finding and knowing God unless you sovereignly wanted that to be in the Bible because it speaks so powerfully to us.

We pray and ask that you would bless us in our lives and the Holy Spirit would speak to us and would challenge us and would change us. And that we would be known to be a people who are returners, ourselves.

That changes the way we look, the way we think, the way we act towards one another and how we reflect your great covenant love together as a community and as a people.

[34 : 22] God help us in this we pray and bless us as we sing together our parting song. In Jesus' name, amen.