

God Brings His People Home

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[0 : 00] Ruth chapter 1. These took Moabite wives.

The name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Malon and Kilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

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. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of her husband.

Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, No, we will return with you to your people. But Naomi said, Turn back, my daughters.

[1 : 26] Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters. Go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown?

Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods.

Return after your sister-in-law. But Ruth said, Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go. And where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me. And more also, if anything but death parts me from you.

[2 : 31] And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said, No more. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them.

And the women said, Is this Naomi? She said to them, Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara. For the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

This is God's holy word. But tonight we're going to start a new series in the book of Ruth. And if you know anything about the book of Ruth, you probably know the first thing you think about is Ruth as a love story, a story between the love between a godly man called Boaz and a poor immigrant woman called Ruth, or maybe the love that Ruth has for her mother-in-law, Naomi.

[3 : 43] Or maybe you think about the love that God shows towards his people when he brings food back to a land that was suffering from famine. But if you were an ancient Israelite, the very start of Ruth doesn't feel like a love story, because the first few words are, in the days when the judges ruled.

And when the book starts like this, this is an ominous sign. And the book presumes that you know what this means. So in our Bibles, Ruth comes just after the book of Judges.

And in the book of Judges, there was no king in Israel. And these judges, these tribal clan leaders, were in charge of what happened. And the book ends by saying everyone did what was right in his

own eyes.

So what we see in the book of Judges is to come just before Ruth is turmoil of some good leaders and some good things, some horrific leaders and some horrific things, almost in a cycle where people stray from God and things go wrong, come back to God and things go right.

So if you're thinking about the days when the judges ruled, you're thinking, wait a minute, there might be trouble ahead. There wasn't a king. People did whatever they wanted. And a lot of the time, it was lawless disaster.

[5 : 02] So this love story doesn't start once upon a time. It starts with a big flashing neon danger sign. And that's the threat that hangs over this story at the beginning.

But it does evolve into a story of love. After the highs and lows of the book of Judges, it reminds us that God through all is working. Yahweh, I am, our God, is not missing when things go wrong. That he is working through all these things to his glory and to our good. He's the God of the big and the miraculous. But he's also the God of the everyday. He performs supernatural sign after supernatural sign.

But he also works in the lives of ordinary people to bring about extraordinary things. So over the next four Sundays, we're going to take each chapter, each of the four chapters one at a time.

And tonight in chapter one, we're going to step into this account which Cody read for us, which is really, I think, an account of deep, honest suffering and apparent emptiness where it seems as though God is missing, but where in fact God is orchestrating all things to their ultimate fulfillment.

[6 : 18] And the question for us is that wherever we are in life, however we got here tonight, however we are feeling, if we feel like we are far from God or we feel that God is not on our side, when we think our situation can't get much worse, God is in fact weaving together a plan when our faith is in him, as hard as it is for us to see, to his glory and to our good.

So God's orchestrating all things, in all circumstances. And we're going to look at three circumstances that we see in the book of Ruth, Ruth chapter one tonight, three hard circumstances, but we see that God is there.

When pleasantness becomes bitterness, then we're going to think about when friendship costs everything. And then finally, we're going to think about when it seems like there's no hope. Okay, so first, when pleasantness becomes bitterness.

So our story begins, and my pronunciation is going to be different from Corey's, with a man called Elimelech. And Elimelech means my God is king.

We're going to see that names throughout the book of Ruth are pretty significant. He lives in a town called Bethlehem. And Bethlehem, maybe you know, means house of bread.

[7 : 36] And remember, we're in the time of the judges, so it's moral and religious chaos. And we shouldn't be surprised when we read there's a famine.

Because Jesus hasn't come. God's people are living under his law. They've not been obeying his law. And they're under divine discipline. So this man, God is my king, takes his family out of the land that God has gifted to his people, this special promised land, and he takes them back east to where they've come from.

The man from the house of bread leaves the house of bread because there is no bread. But in verse 3, already, Elimelech dies.

And he leaves his wife, Naomi, with her two sons. And the name of the first son is Malon. And the root word in Hebrew for his name is the same as the word for sick.

And the name of the second son is Kilion. And the root word that can be derived from his name means something like comes to an end. Both the sons marry local girls.

[8 : 47] And then maybe given their names, sick boy and come to an end, we shouldn't be surprised that they die as well. Three verses and three deaths covers about a decade of time.

And the family that's left home looking for a better life has been blown apart by tragedy. Naomi's lost all the men in her life. So as well as the hurt and the pain that she's feeling as a wife and a mother, in this highly patriarchal society, it also means that she's without a male protector, a male provider.

So to a large extent, Naomi is in a strange land. She's destitute and she's highly vulnerable. And this sets up the key question that the book of Ruth answers for us.

What's going to happen to Naomi? Naomi. So the idea of seed in the Old Testament is really important. Both the seeds that you sow in the ground, in the land, but also seed in terms of

offspring.

People who are going to protect you in your old age, carry on the family line, maintain your land. Now Naomi's lost both kinds of seeds. She's lost, she's no grain, and she's no offspring either.

[10:03] So the harsh reality for Naomi is that she's probably facing a couple of pretty hard choices. She can sell herself into slavery and work for her food.

Or she can pursue one of the few jobs that are available to women in this kind of culture, which might include something like prostitution. So her prospects are not very good.

And notice the narrator, he doesn't suggest that this is Naomi's fault, that she deserves what she's got. It doesn't explain either why God has chosen to do this.

And I think that silence actually speaks quite a lot, quite loudly for us, because the Bible is ruthlessly honest about the fact that we live in a fallen world, and that all around us, terrible things happen to people who we presume are innocent all the time.

In fact, the Bible's much better at dealing with grief than I think we are in modern Scotland today.

We so often feel like we have to downplay our sadness or our grief or our pain, because we don't want to get a reputation as being the kind of person who complains.

[11:21] Or maybe we feel like we need to look inside ourselves and use our own strength to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, reframe our problems maybe in a positive way, think about them differently so we can work through them, pull ourselves together.

You see, the Bible doesn't present those as good options for how to deal with the loss of your husband, the loss of your children, or any other suffering or pain that you're going through.

In the midst of pain and suffering, the Bible teaches us, to be honest, it calls this lament, true space for suffering, and a God who cares deeply about hearing the words that you bring to him.

Every sad, confused, even angry cry that you deliver to our God. About a third of the Psalms are made up of lament, and the writer pouring his heart out over grief and anxiety, loss, guilt.

Psalms 88, I think, is the perfect example of lament because it shows us that God's not embarrassed by your pain. He's not surprised by your suffering.

[12:43] God never wants you to hold back or keep inside the things that you're going through. In Psalm 88, it begins with darkness, there's darkness in the middle, and it ends with darkness.

And as we read it, as modern readers, we keep looking for the but. We're going, where's the turning point? When's this guy going to stop and say, but it's okay, God, you're going to save me.

But God, I'd remember your mercies. See, in Psalm 88, that but doesn't come. It's purely an outpouring of sorrow to God.

But the key lesson is that despite everything that's happened, the writer is still coming to God. Sometimes this is all that we can do.

Sometimes with groanings that don't even form words. But God wants us to bring them to him. And he hears us. Lament says, God, I don't understand what you're doing right now.

[13:50] But I'm coming to you because I've got nowhere else to go. So Naomi has heard that there's bread in Judah. So despite her loss and her sadness, despite telling her daughter-in-law that God's been bitter with her in verse 13, and notice in verse 19, she doesn't just say, God's been bitter to me.

She changes her name to bitterness. Mara means bitterness. Naomi means pleasantness. Mara means bitterness. And she's changed her name. She's not just saying, God's done bitter things to me or bitter things have happened to me.

She's saying, bitter is who I am. That's my identity now. But despite that, she has a promise of food back home.

A promise that God has been good to his people. And she heads for home. And as we carry on through the book of Ruth, it becomes really clear that Naomi's tragedy, and it is a tragedy, was not an interruption to God's plan.

It was part of it. So no matter where you are tonight, no matter how you got here, whatever pain you're carrying, God is not absent from that story.

[15:10] And as hard as it is sometimes to hear, he's working in it all. And rather than being hard to hear, that's a comfort, because God has not left. Often, as we're going to see as we go through Ruth, God's hand is only visible with the benefit of hindsight when we look back.

But as Naomi has a promise, and she's holding on to this promise, even in the midst of your suffering today, you've got a promise too. A promise of true restoration that's available for everyone

through Jesus.

Okay, second point. When friendship costs everything. So from the setup in this first five verses of the story, we see that Naomi's, the main character, is going to be how, what's going to happen to Naomi is what we're going to get to in the end.

But Ruth's the heroine. And verse six, Naomi sets off for Bethlehem with her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But after a little while, she stops and she says, you guys should go home to your own families.

Verse eight says, go, return each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you've dealt with the dead and with me. And that word, kindly, that Naomi uses here is central to the whole book of Ruth.

[16:30] So in Hebrew, it's the word *hesed*, which is often translated as steadfast love. So an example of *hesed* love, I think, is in Genesis, right at the end, chapter 47, where Jacob is living in Egypt.

He's there because of famine. And he's coming to the end of his life and he calls his son Joseph to him. And he says to Joseph, deal kindly with me.

When I die, take me home and bury me in my own land. And that word kindly, deal kindly with me, is this same word *hesed*. And one of the things that makes this *hesed* is a good example of *hesed* is because Joseph knows that there's no way that he's going to be repaid for the love that he shows.

Committed, sacrificial, faithful love with no way of getting anything back in return. And that's what Naomi says that her daughters-in-law have shown to her. And not just to her, but to her sons and to their father-in-law as well.

They've done everything that could be expected of them. They've walked their mother-in-law to the edge of the town. They're free of their commitments. And so, here we see a contrast between the two women.

[17:49] And I think Orpah is a deliberate foil for us to see what Ruth is doing. So, Orpah goes home and she goes home to her family and she goes home to everything that she knows.

And there's nothing villainous about what Orpah has done. She's not bad for choosing to do this. She's done the reasonable thing.

So, Naomi's right. She's not got any more sons to give to them. And the idea of having a replacement son for marriage is something we'll come to later on in the book.

It's a provision for widows and for land. We'll come back to that. But there's no future for these women in following Naomi. The sensible thing is exactly what Orpah does.

But Ruth is clingy. So, Ruth means companion or friend. And she says that she's going to trust Yahweh, the God of Israel's *hesed*.

[18:50] She's going to trust his faithful love and go further by demonstrating *hesed*, faithful love to Naomi, her mother-in-law. So, like Joseph with Jacob, Ruth gives her steadfast love to Naomi and says, I'm going to come with you no matter what.

And in this remarkable short speech that Ruth makes to Naomi, one of the most remarkable speeches I think we have in the whole Bible is amazing. In verses 16 and 17, she says, do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you.

For where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried.

May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. So, Ruth is making a lifelong commitment to Naomi. Wherever we go in life, we're going together.

And see how the phrases that she uses increases in intensity each time? So, she goes, I'll go wherever you go and then she says, I'll live where you live and she says, I'll become one of your people and then she says, I'll worship your God and she's not just given up the beauty of Edinburgh for the mean streets of Glasgow, she's given up her whole life to follow Naomi till death do us part and even beyond death.

[20:16] She says, when I die, I'll be buried in your land and we can miss the significance of this as modern people because we aren't tied to land in the way that the people were in the ancient Near East.

So, in the ancient Near East and pagan societies, specific gods were often associated with geographical locations. So, when Ruth says that, I'll follow you wherever you go and I'll be buried

wherever you're buried, she's giving herself to Naomi for life and in the afterlife. She's entrusting herself to Naomi's God, Yahweh, the God of Israel, now and for all of eternity. And then she swears to it by Yahweh as well.

So, this is a truly remarkable surrender to the God of Israel from somebody who is a total outsider, somebody who wasn't born into this people, who isn't from this land, who hasn't experienced the specific blessings that other people, others of God's people, have experienced.

I mean, to this point, with the words that Naomi uses, all that Ruth really knows of Yahweh is that she is punishing her mother-in-law, or she's judging her mother-in-law, and yet, she binds herself to him through Naomi.

[21 : 42] So, we see Ruth's dedication to Naomi, utter dedication. But I think we have to question Naomi's dedication to her daughters-in-law, because she tells them to go back, back to their gods.

So, I think we've got maybe two different possibilities here. Either Naomi thought that Orpah and Ruth are not the kind of people who are going to be interested in her God, God.

Or she thought that the God of Israel, her God, our God, wouldn't be interested in them. You might have noticed that throughout the book so far, Ruth is referred to as the Moabite.

So, that's not to distinguish her from all the other Ruths in the book. There's only one Ruth in this story. But when my God is king, when Elimelech left the promised land, he didn't just go anywhere, he went to Moab, which is Israel's ancient enemy.

And just an example of how far God's hesed, God's faithful love extends, is it extends all the way to this territory, where people are enemies of his people.

[22 : 58] As New Testament believers, when we read Matthew 28, and the Great Commission, and Jesus tells us to go and make disciples of all nations, I think the question that we have to ask ourselves is, who are the Moabites in our lives?

Who are the people that we live among that we think are just too different from the kind of people that would be interested in God? Or who are the people that are so far off, live life so far from what is expected of a Christian that God wouldn't be interested in them?

Do we try to convince ourselves maybe that they're better off in the situation, that they're in?

Because we feel uncomfortable talking to them about the eternal, about the spiritual, about faith.

Remember, Corey told us this morning from James, sharing the gospel isn't casting judgment on people, on the way that they live their lives. It's a mercy.

Apart from God, everybody is destitute. Everybody's dying. everybody's living in a strange land with no hope. But God's chesed, his faithful love, brings sinners, all sinners, back home when they put their faith in him.

[24 : 20] and at the same time, if this person that you think that God might not be interested in is yourself, if you think God looks at your life, sees how far you've gone, the things that you've done, the lengths that you've gone to to get away from him perhaps, and that he's not going to be interested in you, look at the lengths God goes to to save one widow from Israel's enemies.

No matter how far away that you think you are, know that God is a God who loves enemies. Okay, thirdly, and finally, when it seems as though all hope is gone.

In the movie Gladiator, which is one of my favorites, Maximus is the commander of the Roman armies of the north, and he's been winning battle after battle, and he's amazing, and his men love him, and the Roman emperor and the rulers, they all think he's amazing, he's got all their respect, but despite all his victories, all his praise, he can have his pick of jobs wherever he wants, all Maximus wants to do is go home.

He just wants to go home to his wife, to his son, to his homestead, and live a simple life, to live in peace, but despite everything, when he leaves, he gets back, he finally gets home, and his wife and his son are dead.

The house is still there, but everything that Maximus had been dreaming about while he was in the battle has gone. All the things that made it a home don't exist anymore.

[26 : 04] The place that he longed for has become a place of grief, and that's kind of what Bethlehem has become like for Naomi when she goes home. So this is the place that she belongs, but everything that made it at home has been taken away, has gone.

She went out full, with a husband and kids, and she's come back, and her house is empty. Except she's not empty. Naomi couldn't have timed her return to Bethlehem any better if she tried.

The story started with an ominous warning signal in the days when the judges ruled. But chapter 1 ends with real hope. What might seem like an almost throwaway line, they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest, is a promise fulfilled.

The famine's over, there is once again bread in the house of bread. And it's also a sign of more to come. So barley is the first of the crops that are brought in.

And that means that if barley is the first crop that's going to be brought in, there's more to come. If there's bread today, there's going to be more bread, more good stuff to follow in the future.

[27 : 28] But as well as that, as well as food, Naomi also has Ruth. In verse 19, the two of them arrive in Bethlehem and the whole town is in uproar, it's in a stir.

And the women of the town, they say, this can't be Naomi, is it? So they don't mention at all the young woman that's with her. When Naomi says that she's come back empty, Ruth's invisible to Naomi too.

But just as we finish, let's jump back a little bit to Naomi's speech in verse 16 and 17. let's just read those amazing words again.

Because Ruth says, do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also of anything but death parts me from you. What is Ruth actually saying here?

[28 : 34] So she's saying I'll be with you. She's saying I'll go with you. She's saying I won't ever leave you. But she's saying something else as well. She's saying I'll take your place. Because Naomi is a childless widow with no way of saving herself in a strange land.

And Ruth is saying I'll be the childless widow in a strange land so you can go home. I'll substitute myself for you because I love you to death.

So Naomi's lost both kinds of seed. She's lost food and she's lost offspring. One of them has been restored. There's food in Bethlehem.

And in this moment Ruth is a picture of the other kind of seed that's coming. The great ultimate offspring. of the land of Bethlehem.

Jesus. The friend who sticks closer than a loving daughter-in-law. The one who chose to put himself into exile to save his people.

[29 : 41] People have likened Naomi's story here to the prodigal son. So the prodigal son in the New Testament, the parable of Jesus says, goes out into a strange land and loses everything.

Is destitute and is dying. Until he remembers his father's house, his bread enough and to spare. And he returns home. And when he gets home, his brother, his jealous older brother, won't come into the feast because he's jealous of this younger son and what's happening to him.

But in Jesus, we've got an older brother as well. He doesn't just welcome his home. The older brother, our older brother, Jesus, he went out into exile, leaving all the comforts of home to carry you back on his shoulders.

And this is what Ruth is pointing us to. Jesus, who's from the offspring of Naomi, who saw us poor, dying sinners, exiled in a strange land with no way of saving ourselves, and he said, I'll take your place.

I'll take your brokenness, your suffering, all your pain, your every wrong turn, your every angry word, your every bad thought, I'll take them all the way to the cross.

[31 : 04] I'll substitute myself for you so you can come to your true home, to your loving God.

Jesus, who the New Testament calls the bread of life, he came to save us, to heal us, from all our sufferings, and to satisfy our deepest desires forever.

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you that when we were far from you, in a strange place, lost, starving, no means of saving ourselves, you sent your son Jesus to come for us and bring us home. Now we thank you that as we journey through life's challenges, we're never truly alone because we have one who sticks closer than a brother, closer than a loving daughter-in-law who will never leave us, who demonstrated that chesed love to us by laying down his life for ours.

Lord, thank you that in Jesus you reveal to us the extent of your love. So tonight, right now, we can lay all our hurts, our grief, our sorrow before you because we know that you're the one who can offer us peace, and who will ultimately wipe every tear from every eye and satisfy your deepest desires.

We pray this in the name of Jesus, the bread of life. Amen. Amen.