

Ruth 1

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Date: 15 January 2023

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[0 : 00] But essentially, you know, there's a romance in there, but the big thing that I think which comes out is actually, and a lot of people have said this, that perhaps the book of Ruth should actually just be called Naomi, because she seems to be the central character of the book. It is really about the redemption of Naomi.

In many ways, I think I was thinking about it this week, she is, you know, we've got this, in the New Testament, you have this story of the prodigal son. And I think if you think about Naomi, she is the Old Testament, she is the prodigal daughter of God.

And it's a wonderful way to think about her as we look through Ruth, about her being the prodigal daughter. It's important we see that, it's a story of personal redemption, it's a story of God at work through history, not just in big ways, but in the specifics of people's lives.

And I think that resonates with us, that God is at work, he's got a big plan, but also he's got a plan for each of us as individuals. He's got a plan for the church, but you are not outside of that plan.

But each of us is within that plan as well, that he has a plan for us as a church, and he has a plan for our individual lives as well. It's a story about choices that people make. I think that's one of the things that we're going to touch on today is we're going to talk and think a little bit about the choices that people make and the consequences that they have.

[1 : 25] Because that is what every day is about, isn't it? Every day life is about making choices. Every day we make choices, some of them don't matter at all. You know, some of them are insignificant.

What you had for breakfast this morning is not a big deal. Well, perhaps the route you go to work, it might change day to day, but it's not. It's not a big decision of life.

But yet, having said that, it's still a choice. You still have to make a choice of those things every day. But then there are other things. There are other choices in our life that have a bearing on our future. You know, choose where to live. Where are you going to apply for a job? These kind of big, significant choices that we make, they do have a bearing on our future. They have bigger consequences.

We all have to make choices in life. And when you think about it, actually, some people are blessed with wisdom. And they're good at making good choices and making sensible decisions.

[2 : 25] And God has made us differently. We make decisions in different ways. Some of us are what we call feelers. And others of us are thinkers. Some of us, we just feel what's right.

And that's what we use to make a decision. We go with our heart. Other of us are more thinkers. You know, we like to put down pros and cons of how to make a decision and plot one against the other.

And that's how we come to a logical decision. And there's not a right or a wrong in that. It's just the way that we're made. Nevertheless, whether you are a thinker or whether you're a feeler, it's still important to recognise that however you make decisions and choices, that we do that.

And it's important to recognise that they have consequences. But perhaps now, even as I'm talking about choices, it's often when we think of that, we immediately go back into our memory bank and we can think of the big decisions that we've made that have affected the direction of our lives. You know, as I've mentioned, places where we've lived or what jobs we've applied for. It's really important that I'm touching on this because in this first chapter of Ruth, we see people making choices.

[3 : 44] And we see the consequence of those choices. And I think that's the thing I want to hone in is perhaps, as we think about that, what is our own process of going about making decisions?

And also, a thing that comes through in this is to be aware that we actually don't make choices in a vacuum. We don't make choices that we have a history that perhaps plays into the reason that we do the things that we do.

And we're going to be looking at choices, we're going to be looking at doing that by looking at the three main characters in chapter one. There's Elimelech, Naomi and Ruth. So we're going to be looking at each of those three characters.

Now, before we jump into that, it's really important that we're aware of when the book of Ruth is set. Verse one, we just see it. It'd be great if you've got that page opening your Bible.

255, you've got it on your phones. It says, verse one, in the days when the judges ruled. It's important because we need to know what was it like when the judges ruled.

[4 : 54] But if you flick back a page in your Bible to the last verse of Judges, chapter 21, verse 25, we can see what it was like in the time of the judges. It says, in those days Israel had no king.

Everyone did as they saw fit. In the book of the Judges, there's this repeated cycle that whenever the people do what they want, they forget God and trouble lands at their door.

They cry out to him and he sends judges to rescue them from their trouble. Ruth, the book of Ruth, happens during, in the middle of one of these cycles.

We don't know which one. But the beginning suggests that it's during a time when God's people have forgotten God and that there is trouble. We know that there's trouble because, verse one, we read there is famine in the land.

There's famine in the land and God's people, they don't have any food. There is something ironic going on because the name of the town, you read it, Bethlehem, that Elimelech and Naomi come from.

[6 : 00] It literally means, if you break that down in the Hebrew, it means, Bethlehem means house of bread. So they're coming from the house of bread where there is no bread. There's no food. There's a famine going on.

There is a famine in the house of bread. It suggests during a time that God's people are doing exactly what all of the people and judges did. That they're doing what is right in their own eyes. That they're leaders. They don't have a king. They don't have a leader. They've forgotten him. And trouble has landed at their door. And what we see is, from Elimelech, what we're going to see is they find their own way to try and make, to try and sort out the trouble that they're in.

So that's the first character that we're going to look at is Elimelech. Elimelech. What do we see? We see in response to the famine, Elimelech makes a choice.

He makes a choice with his wife, Naomi. They have two sons. And the choice is to move from Bethlehem, to move from the house of bread in Israel to Moab. And what we see is the importance of understanding what's happening here is emphasized.

[7 : 05] Verse 2 is basically just a repeat of verse 1. But it adds their names in. They have man, Elimelech, wife, Naomi, two sons, Marlon and Killian. They move from Bethlehem, from the house of bread to Moab.

The reason is that the writer of Ruth wants to demonstrate that doing this is what Elimelech is doing.

He's writing his own eyes. This is the thing that Elimelech does, which is writing his eyes and nobody else's. It demonstrates that he's just like every other character in the book of the Judges. And leaving Israel is significant.

Now today, it is totally different to me or you going to live in a new country. It's totally different. Because we can serve the Lord equally in London or New York.

The geography of where we are doesn't really matter. But the land of Israel is different. The land of Israel is different. Because God had rescued his people out of slavery from Egypt.

[8 : 04] They'd walked through the Sinai wilderness to dwell with him. In Israel, it was a promised land flowing with milk and honey. To leave Israel for another country was serious.

Serious. It demonstrates that Elimelech had stopped trusting God to provide for him or his family. Or indeed to rescue them. He doesn't wait around to cry out to God for help.

He just upsticks and leaves. The first choice we see, Elimelech's choice he makes, it is a battle. The second choice to go to Moab is equally as bad.

It's equally as bad. Before the book of Ruth, Moab, if you read through it, Moab is not known for anything good. In fact, if you were to read the origins of the Moabites, it actually comes from an

incestual relationship between a man called Lot and his daughter.

The origins of this whole people, the Moabites, is a sordid one. And it carries on. If you were to look through the dealings of Moab with Israel, they tried to thwart Israel at every turn.

[9 : 11] Idol worship is the centre of how they go about things. They worship a false god. It is not a good place to go. It is not a good place to go to raise a family.

And to cap it all off, Elimelech's own name. Elimelech's own name means my God is king. Perhaps his own name should have given him a clue as to how he should have been living.

Perhaps God should have been the king of his heart. But he acts like there is no king in his life.

Certainly not God. Instead of trusting the Lord for what he needs, he chooses Moab.

I mentioned earlier the prodigal son that Jesus talks about. But this is like the prodigal son who leaves with his dad's money. But he's not going to return.

Elimelech decides he knows what's best. But the repercussions are much worse. Because in the prodigal son we see active repentance. But Elimelech doesn't get that chance.

[10 : 15] Elimelech dies leaving a widow with two sons. And at this stage, perhaps, you might think, well, now Naomi.

She has a choice. She's left with two boys. She has a choice to make. She could, perhaps she could see the error of her ways. And perhaps she might head back to Judah. But she makes a bad choice as well.

And she stays. It's probably taking the lead from her deceased husband. And the boy's father. And her boys take Moab wives.

And then, tragically, her sons die as well. It is an absolute tragedy. We don't know how any of these men die.

But what we do know is that there's three widows left behind. Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. And it has all stemmed from Elimelech's, I don't know whether it's a fear or a lack of trust in God, that he would turn the tide and provide for them.

[11 : 20] But they have let, they leave God's people and experience complete tragedy. There's a famous illustration, probably, it's probably been used loads of times in different churches, this.

I don't know if you've heard it, of what it means to coal in the fire, to do with Christians. The coal only keeps burning if it stays in the fire. If a piece of coal falls out of the fire, it'll go cold and stop burning.

And God's people is like the fire. God's land for Elimelech should have been like the fire where he should have stayed to keep warm and to keep receiving God's blessing.

But he's like a piece of coal that falls out of the fire. He goes cold. He leaves that, leaving God's people is like leaving a relationship with God.

And Elimelech and Naomi, they abandoned the house of bread. They abandoned Bethlehem for the fields of Moab. Leaving God's land meant leaving his people.

[12 : 25] It meant leaving God. And Elimelech went cold. Now as I mentioned today, I mentioned this earlier, things have changed for God's people.

Following the coming of Jesus Christ, there is no geographical boundaries for God. Israel has been replaced, the nation of Israel has been replaced with the church as God's people.

That means that to ensure that we stay in the fire, to ensure that we stay hot for Jesus Christ, it means that we must stay connected to God's people.

And it is a choice for us too. The church, the body of Christ, is actually the place where we get to experience the love of God in fellowship with one another.

Bethlehem might be the house of bread, but Jesus Christ says that he's the bread of life. And his word is where we get to receive that as people together in worship.

[13 : 26] He is the bread of heaven. He is the bread of heaven that Elimelech needs. And the question for us, perhaps this morning, is where and when might we be tempted to abandon the bread of heaven?

To abandon Jesus Christ for the world's provision, just like Elimelech and Naomi abandoned Israel. And I understand that temptation, because sometimes, it's true, isn't it, that the world can seem more real, can seem more appealing.

When difficult it comes, it can seem like the thing that we need is out there, not in here. Where do we turn when the chips are down, or when we don't know what to do?

Will we turn to God, or something else, for answers? Do we run to him, or away from him? The grass is not greener away from the Lord. The grass is not greener away from the Lord's people. And the real reason, the real reason that Elimelech didn't need to leave his home, the promised land, is because a few thousand years later, that God himself, Jesus Christ, would actually leave his own home.

[14:42] Would actually leave the worship, and the glory, and the thrones of heaven, the glories of heaven, to provide a true blessing for God's people.

Not a false promise, like Elimelech hoped for in Moab. Not the false promise the world offers, but the true blessing that comes through knowing him.

Elimelech and Naomi thought exiled of themselves was the answer, but Jesus Christ exiled himself from his father to rescue us and build his kingdom. He was stripped, and left empty, so that we wouldn't experience it.

The second character that we're going to look at is Naomi. I've mentioned before that some people have suggested that perhaps the book should be called Naomi.

It starts and it ends with her, and really, the whole book, it centres around how she walks with God and the trouble she finds herself. And at this point, as you can imagine, she is in utter despair.

[15:46] Complete despair. Her situation brings her to her knees. There is nothing left for her in Moab. As a widow in those days, she would have had no means of support herself.

And so the choice to return to Bethlehem is really made for her, because she has no other option. She's now living in a foreign land, away from her gods, away from her people, no biological family and no means of support.

Going back to Bethlehem was her only option. She is despairing, downtrodden, and she doesn't even want to afflict the lever of suffering that she has had on her two daughter-in-laws.

At Moab, she tells them, stay in your own country. Verse 8, she says, go back to your mother's home. Verse 11, why would you come with me? Verse 12, she can't offer them a husband. Verse 14, she's in this very, sort of, really touching room, and they're just weeping together.

They're just weeping together. It's a desperate situation. Orpah turns back to Moab, but Ruth stays. And we're going to come back and look at Ruth a bit later on.

[16:56] But the point is to focus on here, that I want us to just hone in on, is the emotional and spiritual condition of Naomi. It is a bleak moment in her life. And the word Naomi uses repeatedly to describe herself is that she is bitter.

She is bitter with God. Verse 13, it is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me. Verse 20, she tells the women as she returns to Bethlehem, don't call me Naomi, she tells the local women.

Call me Mara, because the 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. Naomi's name actually means pleasant, but she can't be associated with that.

She is empty, bitter, shaking her fist at God, blaming him. And perhaps we've been in that place when things are really bad, when the depth of the despair clouds everything, perhaps clouds our perspective.

[18:12] And I wonder at this point, what kind of God at this point does Naomi believe in? I wonder if you could have gone to Naomi and asked her to picture the face of God in front of her.

I wonder what she'd have said. Was he a God that was smiling with arms open wide? Or was he a God with teeth clenched at her in a rage?

Did he have his arms just wanting her to run towards him? Or was there steam coming out of his ears? Had he blown his top? What kind of God does Naomi believe in?

I'm not so sure. Now, without the vantage point that God has of seeing all things and knowing all things, the end from the beginning, when difficulty in our lives, it is difficult to comprehend.

We don't have all the answers. How can a loving God allow something like this? And we may be tempted, like Naomi, to doubt God's goodness. Perhaps he's angry with me.

[19:20] The reason, I think, and I think this comes down to, I mentioned earlier, our experiences in life.

The reason we might think that God is like that is actually nothing to do with God. It's to do with our hearts and actually it's to do with our experience of people. Let me explain.

Let me explain. Our experience with people shape how we think about God. Our responses are never made in isolation. Let me just, I'll give you an example.

You know what I mean. If you were a child, if you were to get bitten by a dog as a child, you may grow up fearing dogs and think that all dogs are vicious and warn people away from them. I just wonder where Naomi's idea of God comes from, that God has treated us so bitterly.

Now, we don't know. But the same is actually true for each of us. What we think God is like is connected to our experience of other people. How people have been like towards us in our past.

[20 : 26] That's what God must be like. So if we've experienced something bad happening to us at the hands of someone else, maybe God's really angry over it. And so Naomi has a skewed perspective of him.

She treats and thinks about his actions in the same way she might do another human. He's bitter towards me because of what I've done. He's angry. He must be out to get me. We might think perhaps that's what God is like when we go through difficulty.

That he's out to get us because he's blown his top. How do we view God today? Is he out to get us? Or are his arms open wide with a big beaming smile?

Does he want you to return then? The story of Ruth, as I mentioned, is about the redemption of Naomi from being bitter to seeing God how he really is.

She is the prodigal daughter. And our own personal redemption story involves us seeing God for how he really is.

[21 : 37] And sometimes that might involve, I hope not, the experience of what Naomi goes through. But it might involve painful experiences in our own life. But let me tell you, God's arms are open and he is smiling at you.

It is the story of the prodigal son. And that is each of our stories too. That God, in his mercy and kindness, is loving and good. And he has his arms open wide, beaming at you, wanting you to return to him.

You remember the father in the prodigal son story? Every day he's out there looking for his son, just hoping that he's come back. And when he comes back, is he angry with it? No.

He throws him a pie. He kills the biggest calf. He puts a robe on his back and he puts a finger. He puts a ring on his finger. He's longing for that relationship to be restored.

And he wants each of us to run to him too. Final character. Is Ruth. Ruth. It has to be Ruth, doesn't it?

[22 : 37] It has to be Ruth. She's lost her. Let's not forget. She's lost her husband as well. She's mourning. She's grieving. But she responds totally differently to Naomi.

She responds with faith. Naomi tells her, don't come with me. Why would you come with me? Look what's happened to me. But Naomi, she tells her to go back to Moab.

But her response, it is a remarkable response that we read from Ruth. In the face of suffering, of adversity, of grief.

Just look with me from verse 16. But Ruth replied, she's speaking to Naomi. Naomi, 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. Your people will be my people. And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried.

[23 : 34] May the Lord deal with me. Be ever so severely. If even death separates you and me. It is clear, isn't it, that the Lord God has worked in her heart.

She's seen what's happened to Naomi. And her own family. And presumably the only place that she'll have heard about the God of the Bible, the Lord. Is from either Elimelech, from Naomi or from her husband.

She doesn't have the Old Testament scriptures at hand. This is the only place she could have heard it. And let's face it, the picture that she's got of the God of the Bible.

Is not an endearing one from the experiences that she's had. We don't know what she's heard from her husband. But she's totally, utterly devoted to Naomi.

She's clinging to her. And just think about what Ruth is leaving behind. There's so much uncertainty for her. She's leaving behind her people. She's leaving behind her family.

[24 : 36] She's leaving behind her religion. She's, you think, what is the prospect? I mentioned the Moabites earlier. They're sort of the arch enemies of Israel in the Old Testament.

What is the prospect of a Moabite woman finding a husband in Israel? It is slim. She's giving up everything. Any extended family she has. Committing herself to Naomi.

And to Naomi's God. She even goes one step further. And promises to die and be buried with Naomi. And in the ancient world, this was the ultimate commitment.

To be bound together. Even in death. And notice, she actually calls God the Lord. You see that? May the Lord deal with me, be ever so severely.

Even if death separates you and me. The Lord there in capitals. Only God's people called God Lord. When we see Lord in capitals, it's referring to God as in his name that he reveals to Moses.

[25 : 33] Yahweh. His special name that only God's people used for him. His covenant name. She's laying down her life to serve Naomi. And in doing so, binding herself to Naomi's God.

Her true hope is actually Israel. Because she has become a daughter of Israel through faith. This is her true hope. She's going home to be with God's people. Because she belongs to God.

She's the least likely of people that we expect. She's a Moabite widow and nobody had an outsider. And she knew that to the people of Israel she wouldn't be welcomed.

But she trusts in the Lord. She has faith. Real faith. To welcome her. Not knowing what's going to come. I love this illustration of faith.

I think I've mentioned this before to somebody. It says, a philosopher explains it like this. Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings while the dawn is still dark.

[26 : 39] That's a great explanation of faith. That even though there's uncertainty, the bird who sings in the dawn knows that the light is coming.

But even though there's darkness all around, it still sings. It still has faith that the light is coming. It still has faith that there's going to be redemption. And that God has a good plan for her.

Even when Ruth arrives, she doesn't know what's going to happen. There's uncertainty. She's still in the dark about a lot of things. And I think we must say that that's true when we trust in God. There is uncertainty.

The details of what lies ahead we don't often know. There is uncertainty. There's two things. There's both certainty and uncertainty. The certainty is that whatever happens, whatever happens in your life, God will use to bless us.

He's good. He loves his people. And he's not got an angry face of us, but he's smiling with open arms. Putting your trust in Jesus gives you a secure future. There's uncertainty as well of what that might look like.

[27 : 44] Which is where the trust comes in. What we're also reminded of here is that the good news is for all types of people. Remember, Ruth is a Moabite, but she is welcome day.

It just reminds us that the type of God that we worship is so good. That there is no, like us, there's no prejudice or favoritism or bias. That the promised land is for all types of people.

It's not for the rich or the poor. It's not based on skin color. It's not for good people. But it's for those who recognize that God is the Lord and that they need it. Ruth is not actually the answer that Naomi needs.

What Naomi needs is to see Ruth and see that her response is because she understands the gospel. She understands that God, the Lord God, is good news.

Ruth, actually, in her actions, is a pointer to the good news for Naomi. You see, the gospel, the good news, answers the doubts.

[28 : 58] It answers the doubts that God has our best interests at heart. The doubts that we might have that God has our best interests at heart. And actually, the reason that God has our best interests at heart.

The reason that that is the case is because the one who actually says verse 16 to each of us is the Lord Jesus Christ. Just listen to these verses again. Just listen to these verses again. But said from Jesus to you today.

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. He says, where you die, know I will die in your place.

He clings to us. And Naomi doesn't actually turn in empty. She returns with faithful Ruth, who knows the gospel at heart.

And is modelling that to her. And pointing to her, actually, to the good news of the Old Testament. To the good news of Jesus Christ who will come to save her.

[30 : 04] We're never empty. Because Jesus goes where we go. And he goes further than we've ever gone. Because he goes to the cross for us. Wherever we've come from.

Whatever we've done. There is redemption for us. However we've felt towards God. We will go. And no doubt. There may be experiences in our lives where we feel bitter. And where we feel.

And we feel lots of things. Where we blame God. But Jesus, if we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. He clings to us. He has a hold of us. And he's using our situations to bring redemption.

So that we don't hang on to those feelings. But that we come to a place where we know that there is deliverance. And freedom. And security. And comfort. From knowing Jesus as our saviour.

And God as our father. Who has his arms open wide for each of us today. Jesus is there for you. And will stay with you. Let's put our trust in him. And have a model of the faith of Naomi.

[31 : 07] We have faith like the bird that feels the light. And sings while the dawn is still dark. Let me pray. Almighty God. As we read this chapter.

Perhaps there is a wrestling in each of us. Because we know. And we see the despair. That this family experiences. And perhaps we've had those moments ourselves.

And perhaps there's moments. There may be moments in the future that lay ahead for us. And we know you. But we know. We know you're a good God. We know that you have a plan for each of us.

But we thank you. That however we feel. We can bring our emotions to you. That you're not aloof. Or you're not austere. You don't see how we feel. And treat us without mercy.

But you're gracious. And you're good. And I pray that wherever we're at this morning. I pray that we would know each of us. That God is smiling at us. That our Father loves us.

[32 : 10] And that you always want us to return to you. And that your desire for us. Is to. For us to be with you at your side. And that the blessings of knowing you.

The gifts actually fit for a king given to us. We receive the same blessings. Everything that belongs to Jesus. Belongs to us in Christ. And so we praise you for that.

And I do pray that you would work in our hearts. That we take these truths. And they would land deeply with us. And that we'd know the blessing of what it means.

To be amongst God's people. And to be in fellowship and community with one another. That we wouldn't think the answer is. The grass is greener away from the Lord. But the grass is as green as it can ever be with you.

Bless as we pray. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[33 : 13] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.