

Ruth 1

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[0 : 00] So, you've got Romeo and Juliet, Cleopatra and Mark Antony, Lizzie Bennet and Mr. Darcy.

! They're all classic romance stories, aren't they? And the book of Ruth, if you've read it, you'll know that it has got everything we'd expect from an epic love story.

It's got the sadness at the beginning, the disappointment, the waiting, it's got the confusion, the attraction, and then finally the marriage.

And Ruth and her husband-to-be, Boaz, in the story, are one of the great unlikely romances of the whole Bible, aren't they? Now, I don't know whether this is true, I hope it's not a stereotype, but the big book of Ruth is perhaps one of the books that is very close to women's hearts.

As I've been chatting to some of you over the last few weeks, that seems to be the case. It's one of the few books in the Bible that's named after a woman, isn't it? And in many ways, women do dominate the story.

[1 : 08] Ruth and Naomi, it's a sort of Thelma and Louise kind of story. So it's written about women, set in a women's world, with women's concerns and cares. It deals with childbirth and husbands and women's work and marriage.

But actually, I want to say to us from the beginning, that as we begin looking at Ruth, while it feels like a very feminine book, and it is a romance story, it's a romance story driven by redemption. Redemption that comes through the main male character in the book, Boaz, who we meet at the beginning of chapter 2. So I think there are lessons of male sexuality and leadership in the book. And Boaz will be the man through whom the lives of women in the book are transformed. Boaz will turn Naomi and Ruth's fortunes around.

He will redeem their situation. So it's a book about romance, but it's also a book of redemption. Now over 23 times in the book, the word redemption or redeemer is actually used.

[2 : 22] So it's a story in which the women characters are redeemed by a man. Romance and redemption. And the writer highlights redemption in the book, not just to show us how men should behave in society with women, but to point to the man, the redeemer of all mankind, Jesus Christ.

So Ruth is a kind of shorthand version, really, of the whole Bible story. God's big story of romance. Of him wooing his people, of lavishing his love upon them and turning their lives around.

Of redeeming them back from death through his son, the man, Jesus Christ, the redeemer. So that's where we're heading over the next four weeks.

I hope you can be with us for the next three evenings in August. I want us to look at chapter one tonight, and I've got three headings to help us through that.

It is the romance and the redemption. But firstly, at the beginning of Ruth in chapter one, we see the misery of leaving the Lord. The misery of leaving the Lord.

[3 : 41] So the first chapter of Ruth is a chapter full of misery.

It is a chapter full of weeping and loss and bitterness, isn't it? Back in verse one, we're introduced to an Israelite family from Bethlehem in Judah.

And the father in the family is a man called Elimelech. We're introduced to him. Now Judah, the land that they live in, we're told has been hit by a famine. So Elimelech in verse two, he packs his bags and he says to the family, Listen, we're going to head out of the land of Judah and we're going to live, sojourn in the land of Moab.

So he takes his wife, Naomi, and their two sons. So do you see, they leave the Lord's land. They leave Judah. And they go outside of the promised land.

Now over time, the two sons marry foreign Moabite girls. And those girls are called Orpah and Ruth. But do you see, by verse five, ten years on, out in Moab, all the men in the story have died, haven't

they?

[5 : 00] Look at verse five. Both Malon and Chilion, the two sons, died. So that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Now if you can just picture the scene for Naomi there.

Naomi stands, doesn't she, at the graveside of her husband. And the two sons are buried either side, perhaps, of the grave. You know, we've got some young lads in our family.

We saw my nephews a few weeks ago. They're great fun. And their mother absolutely don'ts on them. And I just cannot imagine, I can't bring myself to think, of the pain that it would cause the family if anything should happen to those lads.

It's just unthinkable. Just imagine the funeral of those two lads. Naomi has to watch her own children die.

Any mother would be shattered by that, wouldn't they? And so she has just a numbing pain, away from Judah and in the land of Moab. You know, the name Naomi means pleasant.

[6 : 11] But by the end of the chapter she wants to change her name, doesn't she, in verse 20, to Marah, which means bitter. No, no, no. No, no. Life is not pleasant in Moab.

It's bitter for this woman. For these widows left behind. It is one of those families, isn't it, that just gets struck with disaster after disaster, heartbreak after heartbreak.

Broken lives and emptiness. But can you see here that it's the misery and the broken heartedness caused by the foolish man, Elimelech, as he has led them away from the Lord.

It is the misery of the separation that has happened between them and the Lord. They've left the Lord's land, Judah.

They've left the Lord. Even though it might look pleasant, Naomi says, No, no. Life away from the Lord has left me bitter and full of sorrow.

[7 : 19] Life away from the Lord has just left me amidst death and pain. Now, the book of Ruth, it comes in the Bible after the book of Judges.

If you didn't know that, Ruth starts off in verse 1, doesn't it? In the days when the judges ruled.

There was a famine in the land. Now, that helpfully sets the time frame for us for the book of Ruth.

At that point, alarm bells should be ringing because there's an unmistakable problem about this time in the Bible story in this period. Just flip back one page to the last verse of the book of Judges. Just have a look there. Chapter 21, verse 25. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Now, Judges is a famous book, isn't it? You've got stories like Samson and Gideon and Ehud. But if you read Judges, you'll see that it's like a never-ending downward spiral of bad behaviour and of sin, followed by misery, followed by God sending a rescuer or a judge, and then sin again, and then more misery, and God sending them a rescuer.

[8 : 34] It's the same again and again and again. The people, it says there, are without a king to lead them in living for God. And they're all just doing what each one of them thinks is best in their own eyes.

Each person did what was right in their own eyes. They did what was right in their own eyes. They did what was right in their own eyes. Again and again. Each person calls the shots in their own life.

Now, don't forget that this is after Moses, isn't it? So they've all got God's law in their society.

They've got the Bible. They know how they should live.

But they're not listening to God's law, and they're not living in that way. They make up the rules on the spot, doing what seems to be best in my eyes, for my life, best for me.

God is just left out of the picture. And so do you see, the famine comes in verse 1. There is a famine in the land of Judah, and that shouldn't surprise us.

[9 : 37] Because famines were a sign from God to the people to say, you are in danger. As you reject me, you are in great danger. A famine was a warning sign.

It was a call out from God to say, come back and live in the right way. Deuteronomy chapter 28 says this, If you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God, or be careful to do his commandments, then cursed shall you be in the field.

Cursed shall your basket and your kneading ball be. Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, and the fruit of your ground. So the condition of the land was like a gauge as to how their relationship with God was going.

So famine was a signpost from God saying loud and clear, come back to me. Because they weren't listening to him, and they weren't living for him. They needed to turn back to him, but when the

signpost comes for a limelight, that's the last place he goes, isn't it?

He says to the family, there's no food here. It's no good returning to God, looking to the Lord, and to his land, and for his food.

[10:58] So he leads them to sojourn in the land of Moab. He leads them away from the Lord and his blessings. It's ironic, because the name Elimelech actually means, my God is king.

My God is king. He was a Christian in name, but not in faith, not in action.

He leads his family away from the Lord. When the going gets tough, he's the family leader, isn't he? But he doesn't run to God, he runs from God.

He did what was right in his own eyes. He looked at what was in front of his face, and he ran from God. So the famine comes, hard times come, but Elimelech doesn't wait for God's bread, does he? He goes for Moab's bread. There's an obvious problem here, but Elimelech addresses the wrong problem, the lack of bread, rather than the lack of relationship with God.

[12:10] He leaves the Lord. And Elimelech's story, it ends in tragedy, doesn't it? Because he dies in Moab, he dies away from God. If hard times come, if famine comes, I wonder, by the time you and I die, where will we have taken our families, if we have families?

No matter what you go through on the way, will you have taken them out to Moab? What sort of legacy will you leave behind? We pray, don't we, that we will never take our families away from the Lord, just doing what is right in our own eyes.

So we see the misery of leaving the Lord for Naomi. The misery of leaving the Lord. But secondly, is there determination to return to the Lord?

The determination to the return to the Lord. Now there's an old TV ad, it's one of my favourite adverts, The Hovis, the bread brand, where a child runs away from the family home.

It's quite an old advert. But you know, mum doesn't panic because she knows the one thing that will bring him back without fail. It is the alluring smell of freshly baked Hovis, isn't it?

[13:34] So the aroma waffles down those Huddersfield streets and that guy starts playing the trumpet and the lad comes back. It's a really moving story, actually. Now, Naomi gets a whiff of something, doesn't she?

Just have a look at verse 6. Naomi, 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 there she is in the fields of Moab. She hears that there is more to be had back in Judah, back in the Lord's land. Now, we're told that they've been in Moab for about 10 years.

Now, just think for a moment. Without our modern communication that we have today, we don't actually know how long it took for Naomi to find out that there was any food back in Judah, do we? Could have been weeks. Could have been months, even. Just think of all that time that Naomi could have been feasting back in the Lord's land when she remained in the fields of Moab.

[14:43] Naomi and the girls were outside of God's land, outside of his covenant blessings. They were outside of God's people, the church in the fields of Moab.

Being away from the Lord and it could have been so much better for them, couldn't it? Life in Moab, it was slowly starving them, sapping their life.

That is life, isn't it? Away from the Lord. It's just sapping. Life away from the Lord, always eating, but always hungry, never really satisfied.

But there is a feast available with the Lord and with his people back in his land. And that's part of becoming a Christian, isn't it? It is to say, why should I do without bread?

Why should I starve when I can go back to God and I can feast from all that he gives to me? Don't we want to be a church where people look in and they go, wow, the hovis is in the oven.

[15:51] It smells so good in there. What is that aroma? What are they feasting on in there? Why should I do without that? So Naomi, she's determined to return to the Lord because there's a feast for her.

Now, Elimelech's choice to leave the Lord earlier has limited the life and provision of the family, hasn't it? Faced with a famine, he thought, you know, I'll grab what is right in front of my face and I'll get away from Judah and I'll go to Moab.

Now, it's interesting if you look at how those two places are described in the passage. Now, every time Moab is mentioned, it's called the country of Moab, isn't it?

Verse 1, the country of Moab. Verse 2, the country of Moab. Verse 6, the country of Moab. Again. Whereas Judah is called the land of Moab, the land of Judah.

Verse 1, the land. Verse 7, the land of Judah. Country and land. Now, those two words are at polar opposites in terms of size and of scale, of place.

[16:58] It's probably the opposite of what we'd usually think. But the word land is used over 300 times in the Bible and it means the earth, the whole world, the big wide world.

And the word country, country of Moab, is used far less. It means something more limited, a smaller plot or piece of land or earth.

So you see, Elimelech chooses, doesn't he, to leave the land, the world of God's land behind. And he goes to the little country of Moab, the big, wide, wonderful world of God's land, and exchanges it for little Moab.

He chooses the limited instead of the unlimited. You know, at that point, he thought leaving the Lord would be the big move for the family, wouldn't it? Leaving the Lord, freedom at last, the country of Moab, the land of opportunity.

But all it's left his wife with is a little corner to bury him and his two sons in. a little tiny piece of land called Moab by a graveside.

[18:17] They find out, don't they, that to leave the Lord is to put your life in a box. It is to live in a little corner. It is to starve yourself and to limit yourself and your family's life.

It is to be closed-minded and stunted. Life becomes restricted and small away from the Lord. the unlimited for the limited. C.S. Lewis puts it really well.

He says, we are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink, sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Infinite joy like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he can't understand what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea.

Great, isn't it? Naomi knows that back with the Lord it smells good. there is a feast back there. So she's determined to return to the Lord back to the big beautiful plentiful wide world of living with the Lord.

Isn't it funny how God calls his people to what often looks smaller and yet is far far bigger. So Abraham he is called to a tiny piece of land isn't he?

[19:36] The promised land. Moses is called into a wilderness and through a wilderness. And people today we are called into a tiny looking church aren't we?

But what looks smaller in the world's eyes is actually far far bigger in reality. because it opens up all of life as it's meant to be lived.

Returning to the Lord. Is that how we think of church? The big full unlimited wide world of God's church God's land.

So they choose to return to the Lord but what about the two daughters? Ruth and Orpah. In the time we've got we just need to see I think the difference in the reaction to Naomi telling them that they have to stay in Moab in verse 8.

Just look there. Verse 8. 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've dealt with the dead and with me.

[20:48] That's an emotional moment isn't it? Both of the girls cry about the prospect of leaving Naomi don't they? Verse 9. They kissed each other and they lifted up their voices and wept.

Verse 14. They lifted up their voices and wept again. They've grown to love their mother-in-law Naomi and they both weep tears about this idea.

They both refuse to go back don't they? In verse 10 they said to her no we will return with you to your people. they refused to go back but the issue here is the desire for marriage and for rest.

Look at verse 11. Naomi said turn back my daughters 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'm 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?

[22:01] The issue here is that the daughters find husbands. Now those words husbands and daughters come up again and again in those verses daughters six times husbands four times.

So in a sense the quest of this book is to find Ruth a husband. To have a husband meant security and to have children was to have posterity and provision for older life.

So there was a lot riding on this decision. To find a husband with Naomi seemed ludicrous. She was too old to have other sons and who would marry two Moabite girls? You see for the girls personal loyalty to Naomi would mean marriage probably wouldn't happen. And so at this point the girls split don't they with Naomi's final appeal to them in verse 13 to 14 both of them cry out but only Ruth clings to Naomi they both cry but only Ruth clings look Naomi says verse 15 your sister has gone back to her people and her gods you should do the same but it's the determination to return to the Lord do not urge me to return from following you Ruth says they both cry but only Ruth clings verse 18 she's determined Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her so it's not just the tears is it the crying that marks a determination to return to the Lord crying tears of repentance but it's a clinging to him to return to him now why is Ruth so different what makes her go with Naomi at this point in some ways it is mysterious isn't it we're maybe not told all of the thoughts in her mind but it's clear that she has a deep desire not to go back to Moab she insists there was a fundamental objection in her soul of living in Moab somehow she knew there was nothing in Moab for her anymore she'd been changed so she's determined and she decides when faced with the prospect of losing everything humanly speaking of perhaps not marrying she makes this call now I wonder whether there are people here tonight and perhaps you wouldn't call yourself a

[24 : 48] Christian but you've been to church a few times you've been with Christians and you've heard the Bible preached and even though you wouldn't call yourself a Christian you know something is happening something is happening inside when you come to church or when you hear the Bible and if you had one last chance and were faced with the ultimatum to stay or to go you'd say like Ruth well I've come this far I just can't go back I can't go back to my old life without the Lord you see before she realised it Ruth was on another road wasn't she the narrow road away from Moab and returning back to the Lord and faced with that ultimatum she decides she is determined I can't go back so I must go to the

Lord it's all or nothing for her now we're in a shape that upholds God's sovereign choice of his people aren't we but we also know that God's word calls us to believe and to act upon our belief and a will to action to actually decide time to decide decide to leave Moab and to return to the Lord and if you're wondering about whether to start on that road back to the Lord or to the Lord for the first time even everyone around us here this evening is on that road just look around you if you're wondering about whether to start on that road see those of us who have got to that fork in the road and we said I just can't go back and be encouraged Ruth wants everything that

Naomi has she wants to follow her doesn't she verse 16 to 18 where you go I will go I will lodge where you lodge your people shall be my people your God my God where you will die I will die her whole destiny has changed her living and her dying she wants to be with the people and serve the God that they serve Ruth says doesn't she I cannot live without the Lord take everything away from me if you want take away my life this prospect of marriage but don't take Jesus away from me she doesn't know what the future will hold does she and the marriage could be down the drain but she can't go back so she decides she's determined to return to the Lord even if life gets harder I can't be without the Lord one writer puts it like this you'd rather have

Jesus during the darkness of night than be without him in the daytime you'd rather have Jesus during the darkness of night than be without him in the daytime the misery of the Lord but Naomi and Ruth determination to return to the Lord they cannot do without him but thirdly as we close in more briefly verses 19 to 22 the misery of leaving the Lord determination to return and the gracious scars of the time in between the gracious scars of the time in between I don't know if you've ever been on a reunion and there's that awkward thing isn't there of trying to remember people you once knew so well years and years ago but time has elapsed hasn't it periods in life go by people and faces change you see them again and so much has gone by you've forgotten them what their names are they seem familiar but you don't know who they are now the women finally make it back to

Bethlehem in Judah don't they but Naomi is not the woman who left there over ten years ago at the reunion the people of Bethlehem look out over the horizon and they squint their eyes she is the figure of a woman who seems familiar but is only a shadow of her former self verse 19 the town is stirred as they return and the women ask is this Naomi is this Naomi is that really you you've changed you've changed so much but it isn't just the sands of time here isn't it it isn't just natural aging but it's the time she's had away from the Lord she's been away from the land away from

God's covenant people verse 21 I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty it's the scars and the memories of a life lived in

[30 : 13] Moab leaving the Lord in fullness and having to return to him in emptiness from pleasant Naomi she is bitter Mara isn't she it's a reminder to her as she returns of the toll it takes when we live our lives doing what is right in our own eyes when we live in a dark box for months years decades even being away from the Lord it is not freedom is it and it's not fun no no Mara she says it's bitter it will ruin your life to willingly willfully depart from the Lord and be away from him the long years of life doing what is right in my own eyes have a heavy toll she's paid dearly and she looks tired she's come back empty she's hardly recognisable but at the same time

Naomi knows doesn't she that the Lord has been behind it to bring her back to himself the Lord has done this and isn't it so sometimes the case that the Lord who will fill us must first empty us in his providence look at verse 22 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 harvest there is a sign isn't there at the end of this chapter of God's graciousness they've returned to the Lord in bitterness and emptiness but the harvest has come the harvest has come and even though their past is full of scars there is a glimpse here isn't there of future hope of harvest and of satisfaction for Ruth and if you look at verse one of chapter two we're given an even greater hint aren't we

Naomi had a relative of her husband a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech whose name was Boaz it is the man who will turn these women's lives around who will redeem them who will fill their empty lives we can be so foolish can't we we can leave the Lord at times and we can experience the bitterness of that limited life but God is gracious to his people to work even in suffering to bring you to the man Jesus Christ his redeemer God's word it tells us doesn't it to come back to him to come back to his wide world to come back to his people to the church and to his redeemer the Lord Jesus not just with tears not just with crying but clinging to him determined so tonight is it time to finally decide to do that why not do it tonight to stop doing what is right in your own eyes are you tired of living in that way and come back to him and to say why should

I go without bread why should I be outside of his land and his people and his blessings living in a corner in Moab let's pray as we close Thank you.