

Ruth 1:1-7

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[0 : 00] Amen. Some of you listen to The Archers, don't you? And it's been running longer than I've been alive. It started in 1951.

! And I think that's a really good description of the book of Ruth.

It's a very contemporary drama. And yet it's got some strange customs that we're going to try and understand. It's a contemporary drama in a rural setting.

But also with a very happy ending. And what I want to do this morning is I just want to introduce the family to you and then talk a little bit about the famine. Because there's a family here who emigrate because of a famine.

And then I want to talk at the end about the way that the Lord brought this to a happy ending for Naomi and her daughter-in-law. So first the family. You've got the head of the family, Elimelech.

[1 : 09] Elimelech's name means, my God is king. His wife is called Naomi. They've got two children, Malon and Kilion. And the story is set there in verse 1.

It's in the day of the judges. There are big things happening. And it's the whole period, isn't there, from Joshua, the start of Judges, to Saul, the first king of Israel.

And when you read that book, it's an eye-opening book. It's a time of spiritual anarchy. It's some dreadful things happening in the book of Judges. In fact, you notice the very last verse of the book of Judges.

Can you just flip open the page? In those days there was no king in Israel. And everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It wasn't an easy time to be alive. And what you have here is life in Gideon's Palestine.

The book of Judges introduces us to some of the great and powerful household names of the Bible. People like Samson and Delilah. People like Gideon. People like Deborah.

[2 : 11] And the book of Judges is all about the big national events. It's how Israel lurched from crisis to crisis to crisis. That's the book of Judges.

But the book of Ruth hones in on one little family. One little family in a little town of Bethlehem. And we're given one little cameo picture of what life was like in the days of the Judges.

One ordinary family. And straight away, that's an application, isn't it, to you and I? It's a reminder that God actually cares about you. There's a hymn that I used to sing when I was a little boy.

God who made the earth, the air, the sky, the sea, who gave the light its birth, careth for me. It's a reminder that God who rules and reigns in the affairs of nations is also intimately involved in the ordinary, everyday concerns of your family life.

Jesus said, didn't he, not even a sparrow falls to the ground without him being involved in it. He's as much concerned with the frustrations and the aspirations of this little family and your little family as he is concerned with whole civilizations.

[3 : 31] He's as much concerned with you this morning as he is with the situation in Ukraine.

Helmut Thielich was a theologian. Helmut Thielich was a great fan of C.H. Spurgeon, but he didn't share Spurgeon's theology.

And he says this, tell me how lofty God is for you, and I will tell you how little he means to you. Now I think that's overstating things in a big way.

But he has got a point, doesn't he? The lofty God has been lofted right out of my private life, he says. If God has no significance for the tiny little mosaic pieces of my life and for the things that concern me, then he doesn't concern me at all.

He's got a point there, hasn't he? Nothing falls outside of the sovereign scope of the providence of God. The same Jesus who taught you to pray earlier on in the service, our Father in heaven, also taught you to pray, your kingdom come.

His kingdom is coming, which is global and universal. God who made the earth, the air, the skies, the sea, who gave the light its form, cares for me. So let's look what secondly happens to this little family.

[4 : 47] We're told in verse 1 there's a famine. It's quite probable it happened in the time of Gideon, Judges chapter 6. Seven years that the people of God are under pressure. They can't harvest crops.

And according to verse 4, it's about ten years before the news got through that the famine was over. And so there was no bread in Bethlehem.

What does Bethlehem mean? Bethlehem means the house of bread. No bread in the house of bread. The promised land, do you remember? A land flowing with milk and honey has no bread. And the people of God who were meant to be faithful were no longer faithful to the covenant that God had entered into with them. And so when you read the book of Deuteronomy, you'll find that there were blessings and curses attached to a relationship with God.

And God's people had intermingled and intermarried with the pagan nations around them. And God's judgment had come down on the land. And so there was a famine.

[5 : 50] There was no bread in Bethlehem. The house of bread had no bread. Things were really tough economically. Materially, it was a recession. And so we're told in verse 2, aren't we?

This little family emigrates. They went to live in the country of Moab. Notice what it says there? It says that they sojourned there. A better translation is they went for a little while.

There are three Hebrew words in this passage to describe the journey. The first one is, and that verse in verse 1, which is sojourned. They were there for a little while. That means they had no intention of staying there permanently.

It was 40 or 50 miles down the road. It wasn't very far away at all, but it might have been on a different planet spiritually. They were only there 40, 50 miles down the road.

They only intended to be there for a little while. And yet, they'd moved beyond the pale of God's people to live amongst the Moabites. It seemed like such a sensible thing to do.

[6 : 56] After all, Elimelech, he had a wife, he had two young children to care for. There was famine in the land. It was common sense. It seemed the reasonable thing to do.

And yet, from a biblical point of view, it was a massive vote of no confidence in God. Elimelech means, do you remember, God is king, but his actions show that he doesn't believe that.

He doesn't live up to his name. And instead of trusting in God as his king, or turning to God as his king, and pleading with God as his king to provide for his family, he walks out of the promised land. And God had expressly forbidden his people from intermingling and intermarrying with the pagan nations around, especially the Moabites. The Moabites are singled out in the book of Deuteronomy. They're particularly dangerous. They worship a god called Chemosh. The Moabites offer human sacrifice. They offer their children to their gods as part of their regular worship.

[8 : 02] And so economically, materially, it makes common sense. From that point of view, it made sense to emigrate to Moab, but spiritually, it's a disaster.

There's no place to raise your kids, Moab. Somebody has described Elimelech's decision as the triumph of the pragmatic over faith.

That could be a line that applies to the whole of the book of Judges. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And Elimelech, he did what he thought was right for his family, but there was disastrous consequences.

And it didn't happen overnight. There's three words. Verse 1, it says that they went to sojourn in Moab just for a little while. Then in verse 2, the word for stay there, it suggests that they began to put down roots in Moab.

And then in verse 4, when Elimelech died, and Naomi and her two sons settled down, to the extent of the sons growing up and marrying Moabite women, now they're permanently, aren't they?

[9 : 08] They're 40 or 50 miles down the road, but they're miles away from where they belong. And that can happen to you. It can happen to people like me.

Think of, there's a man in the New Testament called Demas. And in 2 Timothy 4, Paul says, Demas has forsaken me. He's walked away having loved the present world.

No doubt Demas walked out on Jesus in his heart of hearts. No doubt Demas probably intended to return. But as far as we know, he never did.

And that's why the writer to the Hebrews tells us, take heed, lest there be in any of you a sinful heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.

It happens bit by bit, slowly, imperceptibly. And that's what Elimelech did. He walked out on God.

Let me ask you, is there any danger of that happening in your life?

[10:20] You see, God had brought the people of God to the promised land. He'd given to them a tribe. Each family had an inheritance. Each family, it was divvied up.

They had a parcel of ground and it was their plot in the promised land, God's land. And they were to bring up their family and pass it on to their children and their children and they were to look forward to the Messiah.

It was their inheritance. But Elimelech's inheritance, Naomi's inheritance, they walk out on. It's left untended for.

It's uncared for. It's left to go to rack and ruin while they're in Moab. What about you? You have an inheritance in Christ.

You have an inheritance amongst the saints. God has brought you into his kingdom. And you were in church this morning. But we all know, don't we, that you can be in church this morning and yet be a very, very long way from God.

[11:25] God, it's your inheritance in Christ being cared for and being tended. You see, we say to ourselves, don't we, and our deceitful hearts say to ourselves, I'm just going to take a step back.

I need a little break from living all out. I'm just going to enjoy the world for a week or two. And before you know it, there you are, you've stayed there.

And you're in danger of settling down and getting a taste for what the world has got to offer you.

And maybe you're saying to yourself, like Elimelech, well, what else can I do?

You've got to live, haven't you? Have you? Elimelech might say to us, there's a famine in the land, I've got a wife, I've got two young kids to look after. You've got to live, haven't you?

Have you? You see, the message of the Bible is there's something more important than life. Life itself, and that is God.

[12:36] And your relationship with Him. You're only here for three score years and ten on average. Your children are going to die. Your grandchildren are going to die.

There is something more important than life itself, and that is being right with God and leaving that kind of legacy and that kind of inheritance to your kids and your grandkids.

Noah and Elimelech, it tells us, doesn't it, that they were Ephrathites in verse two. That means they were descendants of Caleb. They belonged to the kind of aristocracy of Israel.

They were pretty well off. There's a hint of that in verse 21. Naomi says, I went away full. Yeah, there was a famine in the land, but they were quite comfortably off in the land.

I went away full, but I came back empty, she says. It's one thing to protect your lifestyle, but there's something that is far more important than being comfortably off.

[13:50] There's something far more important than being comfortably off in this world, and that is being conformable to the will of God. That's more important. There's a story about when the Chinese communists took over China in 1949, and there's a telegram that's sent by a commanding officer of the Salvation Army.

Commander of the Salvation Army is in Shanghai. It's 1949. The communists are coming. He sent a telegram back to head office that just had one sentence, and this is what he said. He said, I'm sitting in the premises, standing on the promises.

Sitting in the premises, standing on the promises. Isn't that what a liminex should have done? He's in the promised land, and he should have stayed there, shouldn't he?

God has made these fantastic promises to these people that he would provide for them as long as they remained faithful to him and kept his covenant. It was the place where every true Israelite should be, sitting in the premises, standing on the promises.

But a liminex walks away. He ups and leaves. And in so doing, he testifies with his feet his unbelief. It's really easy, isn't it, for me to be critical with hindsight and the passage of time and so on.

[15:20] But let's be honest, we've all done this. Isn't that the kind of mistake that many people make, especially middle class Christians in the UK? are the best for our children.

We want them to have a good education. We want them to have the best start in life. And it's possible, just possible, very possible, that in pursuing that for ourselves and for our families, we do it to the spiritual detriment of our kids.

You've got to ask yourself, haven't you, about Marlon and Killian. Married as they were to know about women, immersed in Moabite culture. And you've got to ask yourself, how did those boys die?

Because that is a far more important question, isn't it, than how do they live? Your children, my children are going to die. And your grandchildren are going to die and so will mine if God gives them.

And the question is, will they die well? Will they die trusting in the God of Israel? Will they die, as we sang in Psalm 91, sheltering under the shadow of his wings?

[16:32] Or were they lost? You see, there's no comparison. There's no comparison to living amongst God's people and bringing your children up amongst the people of God, under the word of God, to living in the world.

There's just no comparison. God's son. And yet, how many of us forget that not only in the bringing up of children, but in so many other ways we forget it. It's in the choice of a life partner, in the choice of a spouse, or in thinking about a move to another part of the UK or the world, or about whether we should accept that promotion at work and we make important decisions without asking the questions.

we make really important decisions without thinking about the spiritual consequences. Will this lead me to love God and save him more?

Or will it bring a coldness to my spirit? Will this relationship that I'm thinking about, will it bring me nearer to God, or will it drive me further away from God?

if I take that job, well the money is great, but the hours are terrible, and what will that job mean for my family? What will it mean that I have so little time for my kids?

[17:58] Will it mean that I have all my time at work and no time to serve and volunteer at church? What will be the spiritual consequences if I make that move to Moab and there's a really great house in Moab and I can have a bigger garden but there's no gospel church anywhere near.

It astonishes me. I find it incredible that people will move house and never ask the question is there a good local gospel church that I can get really stuck in with?

It's really easy for me to be critical of Elimelech but we all fall into the same way of thinking can't we? And Elimelech went to Moab to seek a livelihood but he lost a life.

He sought a home and he found a grave. He wanted a future for his family but he brought them almost to the point of extinction. I think it's legitimate to ask this isn't it?

Why was Moab so attractive? What makes the world so attractive to God's people? I think it's this God's people are most at danger they are most vulnerable when things are dry in Bethlehem when there's no bread in Bethlehem that's why God's people backslide it's not necessarily that the world is such a great place it's not necessarily that the world has suddenly become really attractive but it's that Bethlehem has become so dry they're getting nothing out of the ministry anymore prophet Amos describes it as the famine not of bread but a famine of hearing the word of God and that's how it often is in the UK at the minute there's a famine of hearing of the word of God and God's sheep are hungry and they look up to be fed and they get nothing it's always the danger when that happens people will go elsewhere to find their satisfaction and meaning and purpose in life and so if that's where you are spiritually you might be sitting in this church this morning regularly under the preaching of the word but if there's a famine in your heart of the hearing of the word of God if you get nothing out of the ministry of this church let me say to you stay on the premises stand on the promises don't go running off plead with God to visit his people again just as he did in Bethlehem plead with

[20:35] God that he would turn our hearts towards him that his word would come to us not in word but in demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit so that the word would come not just like another sermon or another Bible talk but it would be like dew going on the mown grass so that we're refreshed plead with God to do it because God knows the way to bring us back and that brings us to verses 6 and 7 there is a happy ending isn't it verse 6 then she arose with her daughters in law to return from the country of Moab for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food 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 10 years later in the far country Naomi's ready to return and there's three ways I think that the Lord brings her back brings her back to where she belongs three things first of all there's the rod of

God's discipline you see God loves us too much as his people to let us go whom the Lord loves the book of Hebrews says he chastens and you and I might be tempted to say to Naomi you know troubles and they are severe troubles and I don't want to underplay what Naomi's going through she's in a very difficult time but you and I might be tempted to say to her in her troubles well God has got nothing to do with this Job's counselors would have said that wouldn't they it was your sin that got you into this situation and God is punishing you for your sin we understand the gospel we understand grace and we might be tempted to say to Naomi no no no God has got nothing to do with this that isn't the way that Naomi sees it look at verse 13 look at what she says she says the hand of the

Lord has gone out against me later on in the chapter verse 20 verse 21 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 don't call me Naomi which means pleasant call me Mara which means bitter I don't think for one moment Naomi is bitter I don't think Naomi is a bitter spirit I don't think you can see that I don't think for one minute she's blaming God for her troubles I don't think that I think she's speaking subjectively about how she feels so much as objectively I don't think she's speaking subjectively about how she feels she's speaking more objectively about what's happened in her life she's had a bitter experience and she sees this as God's way of drawing her back of dealing with her whom the

Lord loves he disciplines you must never think as a Christian that when things are going wrong that God is punishing you there's a very simple reason for that you could never ever suffer in this world anything that you go through in this world would be enough to punish you for your sins you deserve far more than all of that if you want to know what your sin deserves you look to Jesus at the cross he was in that barren land he cried out my God my God why have you forsaken me he cried out I thirst he took the punishment that our sin deserves and we know that God only punishes sin in two places he punishes sin in hell and on the cross and if you won't go to the cross to be forgiven you will have to bear the consequences of yourself in hell but in this life do not think that God is punishing me for my sins because the Lord

Jesus for the Christian has taken that punishment on himself but what happens is that God does chasten us that's not quite the same thing do you remember how Paul puts it in Romans he says we rejoice in our sufferings that's the distinctly Christian thing the natural thing is to complain the natural thing is to despair the noble thing is to grin and bear it but the Christian thing is to rejoice we rejoice in our suffering because in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit and the writer says no discipline seems pleasant at the time but painful but later on it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who've been trained for it so God's word for you this morning is this it is don't waste your sufferings be exercised under the chastening hand of God as Naomi is disciplined by God

[25 : 54] God is bringing her back to where she belongs and a little bit later we will see in this book a harvest of righteousness that appears in her life and so God will not leave his backslidden people in the far country and when he seeks to win us back sometimes he does as he did with Naomi personal disaster is a method that he uses the sorrow of bereavement and loss awakens in her a longing to return but there's something else God uses in the loneliness of her situation and the bitterness of her experience she hears a rumor look at verse 6 there's a rumor of God's deliverance she had heard that the Lord had visited his people and given them food how did she hear the weather forecast run on the

BBC website like we all have this week was she reading the financial times and she noticed there had been an upturn in the economy in Israel where did this rumor come what did she hear look what she heard she heard that the Lord was visiting his people that the Lord had come to the aid of his people and so we only think of secondary causes don't we if there's a good harvest the farmers get the praise and the fertilizer it's a bad harvest we blame the weather and we forget that it is God our creator God who made the earth the back of the loaf is the snowy flour the back of the flour is the mill the back of the mill is the wheat and the showers and the sun and the father's will that's what she heard that there was bread in Bethlehem and again that the Lord had visited his people and provided for them and given them a blessing of the covenant he turned their hearts back to himself and that's what happened in the book of

Judges it's this cyclical process where the people apostatize and turn away from God they chase after other gods and then God raises up a saviour a judge and the people's hearts are turned back to him and that's how it goes in the book of Judges and she had heard that God has intervened in the land and God was raising up a saviour that he is visiting his people and so now they are God's people in God's place under God's blessing and their faith has been reinvigorated but we hear an even more remarkable rumour we hear a remarkable rumour that in the town of David this day a saviour has been born that God has sent his redeemer into the world into this little town of Bethlehem that into the house of bread comes one who claims to be the bread of life have you heard that rumour she heard a rumour that God had visited his people and I wonder whether you've responded to that rumour wherever you are in your life now whatever your circumstances may be Pascal the philosopher said that in each and every one of us there is a God shaped hole which only Christ can fill John Paul Sartre was another atheist he remained an atheist but he said something very interesting he said that God doesn't exist I cannot deny he said but that my whole being cries out for God I cannot forget and each one of us has a hunger for God every single one of us have been created with a sense of the divine God has put eternity in your heart and that's what brought Naomi home the rod of God's discipline God dealing with her in the hard things but also the rumour that God isn't a concept but he is the sovereign God who has not spared his only son but he's visited and redeemed his people that he sent the Lord Jesus into the world to take the punishment for our sins and to give us a future and that's the rumour that she heard and there's more than a hint of that in the book of Ruth because she is the grandmother of David and David is the great ancestor of David's greatest son the Messiah there's a direct link isn't this from this story of Ruth to the Lord Jesus to us because God is living and powerful and sovereign and in his providence and in his grace he's visited this planet and there's no better news than that that God has come and visited his people and he's brought to us the bread of life without which our souls will perish and so what's the third thing she does as we finish she comes back to God doesn't she in genuine repentance I was reading this an article this week about kind of the cheap airlines you know easy jet all those ones that are around for a little while but they never last and there was one airline that some of you might remember was run by a guy called Freddie Laker and it was Laker Airlines it went bust in 1982 it went bust but there was a flight that was still in mid air mid flight it was on its way from

[31 : 44] Manchester to Switzerland and the news broke that the company had kind of gone bust and the plane had to turn around and go back to Manchester can you imagine the disappointment for those passengers Margaret Thatcher the Russians called her the Iron Lady her colleagues were worried that her reforms in the UK were going too far and she gave that famous speech where she said to her colleagues at the party conference you turn if you want to but the lady is not for turning but Naomi is for turning and if you are wise this morning you will be for turning too we can't spot it really in the English but 11 or 12 times the word turn comes up in chapter 1 it's the same in the prophets in the Old Testament they call God's people back to covenant faithfulness it's the word repentance she turned she turned right around she admitted that she got it wrong and she came back to God and I went out full of myself she says

I went out full of my plans full of my hopes for the future but I've come back empty and you may be in church this morning but you've drifted and you've gone far off but there's a way back this morning and Jesus said what profit a man if he gained the whole world and lose his own soul what profit is there if you achieve all your goals you fulfill all your dreams and you gain the whole world but in the process you lose your soul you lose yourself what good is that you become a hollow shell of what you were meant to be where's the profit in that Jesus says what profit is what good is it if you gain everything that you want to gain but in the process you lose your soul Jesus asks another question doesn't he says what will you give in exchange for your soul what are you going to give to get your soul back the answer is nothing the answer is there's nothing you can give nothing you can do this morning could my zeal no respite no could my tears forever flow all for sin could not atone you must save God and you alone you've got nowhere else to go today except to him you've got nothing to offer him you've got no way for making amends but you can come back to him and you can do what Naomi does and she shelters under the wings of the almighty God let me encourage you to do that to come back home to him where you belong to shelter under his wings ready network network network