

# Ruth 1:8-18

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[ 0 : 00 ] Okay, Ruth. The book of Ruth is just after the time of Judges. Like I said last week, it's an everyday story of country folk.

It describes for us what life was like for just an ordinary family in the days of Judges, in the days of Gideon's Israel. And so that's where we are this morning.

And we're looking at the turning point. It's quite early on in the story, but we're in the crossroads in the book of Ruth. London is a city, isn't it, full of immigrants.

And many people have come to this city in search of a better life. It's often why people leave one culture and they go to another. To go to one where they speak another language and they settle down permanently there, people are in search of a better life.

There's tens of thousands of people like that, aren't there, in London today. There are tens of hundreds of women, and like these women we're going to be looking at this morning.

[ 1 : 08 ] Naomi and Orpah and Ruth. Tens of hundreds of widows in our city today who've suffered unbearable loss. If we had to make a movie of the book of Ruth, we'd probably call it three funerals and a wedding.

You don't get to the wedding until the end of chapter four, but there are three funerals. Naomi's husband Elimelech has died. Elimelech and Naomi, they'd left the land of promise.

The promised land in search of a better life, of a fresh start. Times were tough during the days of the judges. There was a famine in the land, we're told, and they left instead of staying put where God had promised to bless them.

Instead of sitting on the premises and standing on the promises, they upped and they left. They walked away from God's land. They were looking for a better standard of living.

They were probably pretty well off. They were Ephrathites. They were a wealthy family in Israel.

They were from one of the leading clans. They were descendants of Caleb, one of the great heroes of Israel.

[ 2 : 19 ] But times were tough. And so off they go in search of a better life. And it all goes pear-shaped for them. But now God is dealing with them. And God is bringing them back.

And Naomi is turning around. And she's coming back to where she belongs. She's only been 40 or 50 miles down the road. But spiritually, she's been a long way off.

She's been in the far country. The apostle Paul says, Anywhere outside of the people of Israel. Anyone outside of Israel.

That's us. We are Gentiles. Most of us here. Paul says, We are foreigners to God's promises and covenants. And so Naomi and Elimelech, they chose to go out of Israel to walk away from God's promises.

To go to the Gentile countries. And not any old country. To Moab. Of all the places to go. There are Gentile places. And then there are Gentile places.

[ 3 : 25 ] And Moab was particularly singled out in the book of Deuteronomy. It was a bad place for God's people to be. They were God's enemies. It isn't just like us deciding that there's somewhere else you'd rather live.

It's not like thinking, Well, I'd like to move to Vancouver Island. Or I'd like to go to New York. No, it's like somebody from Ukraine going to live in Russia.

It's like going to Syria. And living under ISIS. The Midianites were dreadful people.

They worshipped Chemosh. Required human sacrifice. And so this lady, Naomi, she is the prodigal daughter of the Old Testament. She's gone into the far country.

Far, far away. And God's hand had been upon her. And she confesses. Do you remember last week? We saw God is turning her around. He's dealing with her.

[ 4 : 36 ] He's cutting her. And it's a bitter experience. That she's passing through. And he turns her around. And now she's going back. And she brings with her, her two daughters-in-law.

Oprah and Ruth. Oprah and Ruth, they'd never been to Israel. But the author tells us now they are returning to Israel. And in fact, that's the big emphasis.

You can't see it so clearly in the English. But 12 times, the word turn, turn, turn, keeps coming up. And so what we're going to look at this morning, Jonathan Edwards would have called the narrative of a surprising conversion.

Because that's what you've got here. You've got the conversion of an outsider. You've got the conversion of a Moabitess. The conversion of Ruth. And so I want to talk about Ruth's faith.

And Oprah's failure. And then I want to talk first of all about the Naomi factor. The Naomi factor. Because it's obvious, isn't it, that this lady, Naomi, has had a huge influence on those two girls.

[ 5 : 41 ] So there are, aren't there, awful mother-in-law jokes. And mother-in-law stories. And some people would do anything to get away from their mother-in-law.

And the bond between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law isn't always the strongest. But here there is a strong bond of affection, isn't there, between Naomi and her two Moabitess daughters-in-law, Oprah and Ruth.

In one sense, that's totally understandable. They've been through a lot together. They've suffered terrible bereavement together and loss. And that's obviously drawn them together.

There's obviously a great deal of affection between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. But it goes deeper than that, I think. Because these girls are not only attached to Naomi, but it seems to me, as you look at these verses, they are attracted to Naomi's God.

And I think that's something that comes out really strongly. It's surprising, that. Because when people go through bitter experiences, when they go through tough times, very often it puts them off. Sometimes it is then, and from then, that people walk away from God.

[ 6 : 53 ] Why is he allowed this to happen to me? But it seems here that there's something that's happening which is actually drawing these two girls, these two Moabitesses.

These two Gentiles, girls, were being drawn to the God of Israel. What is it? Well, I want to argue with you, and it's almost counterintuitive.

I want to suggest to you that what's so attractive to these Moabitess girls is not so much Naomi's togetherness, but Naomi's brokenness.

Look what she says to them in verse 13. She says, this is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand was against me. Naomi's saying, this is a tough time for me.

I've not got it all together. It's not good for you to be with me. Go back to your own family. Go back to your own friends, to your own home. It's not a good time to be with me.

[ 7 : 56 ] God is dealing with me, and it's tough. I came out full, but now I'm going back very much empty. There's not much of a future for you girls with me.

And there's a sense, isn't it, where you would think, well, that would put them off. But they want to go with her. They are compelled by her honesty and her openness.

And so if I can apply it to you, sometimes in our foolishness, we imagine that as Christians, we have to keep up appearances. That we have to keep up a good show, not to let the side down.

And so often, we pretend that we are not what we are not. I was speaking with somebody who their dad is towards the end of his life, and he's been very, very difficult to live with for his wife, for my friend's mother.

And she says, it's been a really, really hard time for the family. She says, apart from when his brother, who is not a Christian, calls, and at that point, he pretends to be the most gentle, most accepting, kindest man of all.

[ 9 : 08 ] And we think, well, that's ridiculous, don't we? But I see that in my own life too. That we can pretend to be what we're not. Of course, God sees through that, isn't it?

He is the one from whom no secrets are hid, all hearts open before him. We can't fool him, but we can fool other people. To a certain degree, but people see through it, don't they?

That's why often people say to me, the problem is with churches, it's just a bunch of hypocrites.

Because they see hypocrisy. And not only one of the reasons why it doesn't work, it's because it's phony.

There's a lot of phoniness around in churches. But there's something worse than phoniness. It's actually kind of counterproductive. In a sense, if you are trying to pretend, if you are trying to act,

you are misrepresenting the God of the Bible.

You are basically misleading people into thinking that the God of the Bible, well, he is the good people's God and he is the together people's God. So people say that to me, like they say to you, I'm not good enough.

[10:21] You don't know me, I'm not that sort of person. I could never come to church. And people get that impression from us, don't they? Because we're so high and mighty, they couldn't possibly come among us.

Because our God is the good people's God. But he isn't, is he? He is the God who is gracious and forgiving and full of mercy and full of forgiveness and kindness.

He's the God of sinners. And he dwells with the contrite and with the brokenhearted. You see, what was it that brought Orpah and Ruth back to Israel?

It is what they saw in Naomi. And what they saw in Naomi was her brokenness, not her togetherness. And so if my people, God says, who are called by my name, humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will turn from heaven and forgive them and heal their land.

And so what will God use to reach Ealing? What will God use to reach London? Not a proud, strutting, triumphless church. But a broken church.

[11:41] Not a bunch of Pharisees who are trying to occupy the high moral ground and looking down their nose on everyone else as if we were special. We're just sinners, aren't we, who've been forgiven for goodness sake. There's no difference between the people in here and the people out there other than we've found a saviour.

A saviour who's full of compassion and kindness, who shed his blood to rescue us. And that is what God will use. And so as a church, we don't need better PR to make ourselves look good to a watching world.

There's a great competition amongst ministers about who's got the best church website. And so if you go on to various churches, it's like a kind of arms race amongst church websites, isn't it?

People are arguing with their deacons, can I have more money for the website? And you look at the photos on the website. Does that result in really reaching people?

Our website's very good, by the way. Joanna, thank you. And loads of churches are at it, aren't they? But we need to come in brokenness before a holy God and confess our sin and our guilt so that something of his kindness that we experience might be seen to others.

[13:11] And that's so attractive. So why then, if that is the case, why does Naomi, if you look in verse 8, why does she try to persuade her daughters-in-law to go back to their pagan gods?

Those pagan gods. That's what it sounds like, isn't it? She's obviously very concerned for them.

She prays for them, in fact. Verse 8, she prays, May the Lord, may the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt kindly with the dead and with me.

She's concerned for them. She's concerned for them spiritually. The word kindness is the key there. It's the key word in the book of Ruth. It's the word *chesed*, which means covenant love or steadfast love.

It's the word for God's kindness to his people, God's kindness to sinners. It's the word that is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. So in the start of John's Gospel, we're told that the word, that is the Lord Jesus, he was made flesh and he dwelt amongst us and he was full of grace and truth.

They're synonymous words. Grace and truth, it's not like he had grace in him and he had truth in him and we must be sure that we've got that balance of grace and truth.

[14:34] It's not that at all. Grace and truth are the same thing. They describe what this word means, *chesed*, covenant love. God is faithful to his covenant. God will keep his word to his people even though it will cost him dearly.

It will cost him his own dear son. And that is the word that's issued here. It's used here. That is the attitude of heart that Naomi has towards her daughters-in-law.

That's why she's urging them to go back to Moab of all places. Well, I think the only way I can understand it is that she's wanting them to count the cost.

They're not going to take no for an answer. They are determined to follow her back into the land of Israel. But it's not a good time in Israel.

It's the time of the judges. And so she's basically saying to them what you often find in the Gospels. Do you remember there was this yuppie guy?

[ 15 : 35 ] He was a really young guy. He was rich. He was good looking. He had everything. He had all the money. Everybody knew who he was. He was a pillar of society. He had all the perks of being upwardly mobile in society.

And he comes to Jesus and he says to Jesus, good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And he brings his CV along with him and he says, I've done this and I've done that. Ever since I was a kid I've kept the law. And Jesus says to him, go and sell what you have and give it to the poor. And because the man was very rich, he turns around and he goes back to Moab. The gospel says he went away sad. Not because he was wealthy. Not because he had riches. But because those riches had him.

He was an idolatry. He was a worshipper of other gods. He was worshipping his wealth and his status. And Jesus says, if you're really serious about this, if you really want to come after me, if you really want to follow me, then deal with that issue.

[ 16 : 40 ] Go and sell what you have and give it to the poor. If you want to gain your life, Jesus says, you've got to lose your life. Do you understand that principle? That's what repentance is all about.

If you want life from Jesus, you've got to give your life away in order to get it back. It's what Peter said to the lame man at the gate of the temple.

He says, silver and gold have I none. I can't give you that if that's what you're here for. But what I have, I give you in the name of Jesus Christ. Get up and walk.

You see, I've got to tell you this morning, there's a great cost to becoming a Christian. I don't think we emphasize that, particularly in my preaching enough. There's a cost to following Jesus and Naomi is wanting her daughters-in-law to count the cost.

And she rubs their noses in it. She is very almost cruel to be kind to them. Look at verse 11. Why would you come with me?

[ 17 : 45 ] She says, am I going to have any more sons to become your husbands? It's the only hope in that culture at that time. The only hope of survival. These girls had to find a husband to get married.

It's very politically incorrect from our perspective. But in that culture at that time, that was the reality. That the only hope of survival was to raise sons to get married.

And she says, there's no hope of that happening now. If you follow me to Israel, who is going to marry a Moabitess in Israel? You think America's got problems with racial tensions.

It's got nothing compared to what it's going to be like for you girls in Israel. If you follow me there, a Moabitess, she drives it home to them.

It's almost comical. She says, look, even if I get back there, and I've got twin boys, and you're going to wait around for them to grow up so that you can marry them, is that really going to happen?

[ 18 : 46 ] I'm past childbearing age. And by the time I grow up, by the time those kids grow up, you'll be past childbearing age. So it's a touch of reality.

Do you see what she's doing? It sounds cruel, but these are harsh times, and she's being cruel in order to be kind to them. And we need to realize that we need to count the cost.

And here are these two girls, and maybe you in this congregation this morning, you're at the crossroads, and you're wondering, am I really going to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, or will I follow what I want and my own dreams?

And you've got to make the decision. Are you going to go back to Moab and go back to where life is just a little bit easier, where you can pursue what you want? Or are you going to abandon all that to follow Jesus and abandon all your own plans for the future and take control of your life?

Let him take control of your life. And that's the decision that these girls faced, the turning point, the crossroads. So what happens? Well, we know what happens.

[ 20 : 01 ] Orpah goes back. Orpah's failure. You know, Oprah, Oprah was meant to be called Orpah, but the registrar spelt it wrong.

So Oprah Winfrey was meant to be called Orpah Winfrey. Because of that spelling mistake, she's become known as Oprah. Why would any mother want to call her Orpah?

Because Orpah went back. It's a tragedy. Orpah was the almost Christian of the Old Testament. Do you remember, in the New Testament, Paul is on trial for his life.

He's in front of King Agrippa. And King Agrippa listens to him and King Agrippa says, you almost persuade me to be a Christian.

You're trying to persuade me to become a Christian and you're almost there, Paul. That's what Orpah was. King Agrippa says to Paul, do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian?

[ 21 : 12 ] That's what Agrippa said to Paul. Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? Paul's answer is magnificent. Paul says, I don't care if it's a short time or a long time, I want you and everyone else to be exactly like me except for these chains.

Paul says, of course I'm trying to make you a Christian. Of course I want you to come with me. Of course I want you to come under the shelter of the wings of the God of Israel. I want you to experience his covenant love and his kindness.

I want you to have a future amongst his people. Of course I want to persuade you. I don't want to pull the wool over your eyes. So it's not going to be easy, is it, to be a Christian in the coming years. But of course, of course I want you to be persuaded to come to Jesus. The Christian faith is a public faith. We can't keep it to ourselves. So whether you're in the school playground or anyone else for that matter, whether you're in parliament or anyone else, you cannot keep it to yourself because to do so would be to deny you what it is.

And so my job is to persuade you to follow Jesus Christ, but there is a cost. And we want you to count that cost.

[ 22 : 30 ] Somebody's put it like this, the choice before Orpah was Yahweh plus nothing or everything minus Yahweh. And that's the choice that confronts every one of us.

I'd rather have Jesus been new. I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold. But Orpah goes back. Orpah chooses Moab. She chooses the lifestyle she's comfortable with. She chooses to stay in charge. She chooses the immediate, the temporal, the visible.

And she chooses a life in Moab. And we're told in verse 14, she kisses her mother-in-law goodbye. When that rich young ruler came to Jesus and Jesus saw him go away because he was sad, do you think Jesus cared?

Of course he did. It tells us Jesus loved him. It's a poignant moment, and here's a poignant moment. Orpah goes off into the darkness, and it breaks Naomi's heart.

[ 23 : 39 ] If it wasn't broken, enough already by then. And Orpah goes back, and then this is the amazing part of the story. It's so surprising, is that Ruth, she decides to follow.

And it's a profession of faith. That's what it is. It's Ruth's faith. Have you heard these words before? Do these words ring a bell to you?

Where Ruth says this, for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. And here it is, your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.

The bell that should be ringing is this, I will be your God, and you will be my people. God says to Abraham, it's the theme tune of the Bible. That is the heart of the Bible, the heart of the covenant. That's what Paul says in Galatians, was the gospel that was preached to Abraham. And now here comes this Moabite, this girl from the middle of nowhere, and she takes the words of the covenant on her own lips, and she says, your God will be my God.

[ 24 : 51 ] And your people will be my people. And she wants to come in amongst the covenant people of God. And she wants to know the kindness of God, and she wants to experience the covenant of God.

she wants to shelter under the Lord's wings, and she embraces the covenant. And so we're told in the next two chapters how she comes to take refuge.

You see, she knew what she was doing. This isn't sentimentality in Ruth 1. This isn't desperation. She's seen, hasn't she, in the flesh and blood example of Naomi.

Naomi. Naomi has been an instrument in the Redeemer's hands. She's seen a flesh and blood instrument of God's kindness to others.

That's what she's been to these girls. And that's what Ruth is experiencing. And she's seen the kindness of God and how it's been played out, that it's overflowing in her life.

[ 25 : 53 ] And Ruth has seen the character of God. As you think, Donald McLeod, has got a line in one of his books where he says this, there is nothing un-Jesus-ness about God.

There is nothing un-Jesus-like about God. Do you know what Jesus says? If you've seen me, you've seen the Father. Do you want to know what God is like, Ruth?

He's nothing like Chemosh, or any of the other pagan gods you've experienced back there in Moab. Do you want to know what God is like, Ruth? Look at Naomi. Look at her flesh and her blood

example.

Look at Naomi's kindness, look at her faithfulness, look at her tenderness, and you get a glimpse there of what Naomi's God is like. And so you want to know what God is like this morning? You look at Jesus. The word who was made flesh and dwelt amongst us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth.

[ 27 : 09 ] And that Jesus said, that if I thirst, that I should come to him. And that no one else can satisfy, so I should come to him. And Jesus said that if I am weak, I should come to him, that no one else can be my strength, that I should come to him.

There is nothing un-Jesus like about God. And you can trust yourself, can't you, to a God like that? The Jesus who said that if I fear, I should come to him.

That no one else can be my shield, I should come to him. And Jesus said that if I'm lost, he will come to me. And so Ruth does that.

She comes and she shelters under his wings. And she's gloriously converted. The Westminster Confession says that it is out of a sense of the mercy of God that we are brought to repentance. That is so, so helpful. Paul, so sometimes people come to me and say, actually, we need a little bit more of the holiness of God and we need a bit more of the fear of God put into us.

[ 28 : 25 ] Lay the law down a bit. If you make people feel really guilty, then they'll repent. But that isn't the way. The Westminster Divines were right. It is out of a sense of the mercy of God, not just emotion, but out of a sense of the mercy of God, then we repent.

And Ruth saw in Naomi the mercy of God. She saw Naomi's heart of kindness. It's interesting, isn't it?

The book is called Ruth, but the first chapter is all about Naomi. Because God used Naomi in all that she suffered to bring Ruth to himself. I think it's really helpful to ask yourself, how would Naomi have felt in Ruth chapter one?

She must have asked herself countless times in her darkest moments, as many of you ask yourself, Lord, why? Why do I have to go through this? Why is this happening to me?

And part of the answer, well never of the full answer, but part of the answer, God's great purpose in Naomi's life was not to punish her for her sin, but to reach out to bring Ruth the Moabitess into the kingdom.

[ 29 : 43 ] The Apostle Paul put it perfectly. In 2 Corinthians he says, where death is at work in us, but life in you. And so we want to see our friends and our relatives come to life in Christ, don't we?

We want the people whom we love and live amongst to have eternal life, which is to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. Do you want that? Well you very may well have to suffer.

And you may well have to die a thousand deaths for that to happen, but it's worth it, isn't it? God used Naomi's suffering to bring Ruth into the kingdom.

And that is the way God's works. And so maybe this morning you are very much like Naomi and you are aware of great regrets in your life.

And you are more aware this morning of your failures than your successes. And you are more conscious of your sinfulness than your giftedness. And you think to yourself, God could never use me.

[ 30 : 57 ] And if you'd said to Naomi back then on the road to Moab in Bethlehem, if you told her that God would use her in a way that would have people talking about her in the UK 3,000 years later, she would have thought you were stark, raving mad.

And if you told her there and then that in her suffering and through her tears God was going to use her to bring the saviour of the world, she would never have believed you.

But that's exactly what he did. In the worst of times when it could not have been worse morally or spiritually in the time of the judges, that is what God did. He brought a Moabitess.

He brought a foreigner, the worst sort of foreigner, and he brought her into his kingdom amongst his people and he saved her and she became the great grandmother of David. That's a surprise at the end of the book, isn't it?

King David was of course the ancestor of the Lord Jesus, great David's greatest son, the saviour, the redeemer. And God did that 3,000 years ago in a very, very ordinary family, living in a tough and difficult place with broken hearts.

[ 32 : 20 ] But if God did that then, he's the same God, isn't he? And he can do that now. And he can do that through you, through me, and through this church, despite all our faults and all our

feelings.  
Let's pray.