

## Ruth 1 – Perseverance pays off

Over the book of Ruth, we are going to see that perseverance pays off. It pays off because as we persevere in trusting in God, we receive his sovereign protection and providence that is for our best.

I would encourage you to take half an hour and read the story beginning to end, it's an amazing story. It's a story that shows how "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform." It's a story for people who wonder where God is when there are no dreams or visions or prophets. It's for people who wonder where God is when one tragedy after another attacks their faith. It's a story for people who wonder whether a life of integrity in tough times is worth it. And it's a story for people who can't imagine that anything great could ever come of their ordinary lives of faith. How can one story do all that? Because it's a story that ultimately points us to Jesus and the redeeming work he was going to do on our behalf.

A book that shows us the work of God in the darkest places whilst God's hand is at work behind the scenes with no direct mention of God.

This first chapter sets up the scene for why the faith and perseverance of Ruth is so remarkable.

### **The setting**

It is set in tragic and dark times.

#### **1. The time**

- V1 tells us it is set in the time of the judges
  - A 400-year period after Israel (God's people) had entered the promised land under Joshua and before there were any kings.
  - The book right before Ruth is called Judges and the final verse of that book tells us Judges 21:25
    - In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.
      - It was a dark time for Israel
        - The people would sin, God would send enemies against them, the people would cry for help and God would mercifully raise up a judge to deliver them.
  - It was not a good time as people did as they pleased and wandered away from God's way, yet we see in Ruth this great love story, God's plan to save.
    - Sound familiar?
      - In the world today there is national and international troubles, pandemics, wars, moral decay and difficulties of every kind, yet God loves this lost world and is seeking a bride.
        - Bride is what the Bible calls the church/followers of Jesus.

- In spite of the dangers around us and rejection of God's way we can be sure God still loves sinners and wants to save them just as he saved Naomi and Ruth.
- A time of famine
  - A discipline from God upon His people to draw them back to himself
    - Leviticus 26:3-4
      - If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase.
  - The rains are withheld so food runs out
    - It is the hand of God.

## 2. The place

- Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons leave Bethlehem – we know the future importance of Bethlehem
  - Bethlehem is part of Israel and where God's people live
  - Bethlehem means 'house of bread' so it's strange that there is a famine here
    - Regionally it would have been known as a place with plenty of food.
- They leave and head to Moab which is a pagan land with foreign gods.
- In this act they were playing with fire since God had called His people to be separate from the surrounding lands
  - Moab was only around 30-50 miles from Bethlehem but a place they had been told not to go.

## 3. The decision

- Elimelech has a decision to make
  - Stay at home and wait for God to provide or turn to what he can do.
- When trouble comes to our lives, we have one of three choices; to endure, to escape or to enlist
  - If we simply endure then the trial becomes our master, and we end up hard and bitter
  - If we try to escape we will miss the God-intended purpose of the trial and what He wants to achieve through it
  - If we enlist our trials, then they become our servants instead of our master and work for us and God will work through them to achieve great things (Romans 8:28).
- Elimelech made the wrong decisions
  - He chose to try and escape
    - He leaves Bethlehem and with it God's people
      - He isolates himself and no Christian can survive like that.
    - He walked by sight and not by faith
      - He fled the famine rather than waiting upon God for the answer
    - As a husband and father, he wanted to provide food for his family and so takes them to where there is food
      - Doesn't sound like a bad idea
        - But it is when God has said no to that plan.

- He let his sons marry Moabites.
  - Again in direct opposition to the commands of God.
    - Jews were forbidden to marry gentiles, especially Moab's (Deut 7:1-11, 23:3-6, Neh 13:1-3, Ezra 9:1-4).

#### 4. The consequences

- Elimelech means "my God is king" but that is not how he lived and as a result there are consequences.
- He decided to leave temporarily (that's what sojourn means) in order to have food
  - 10 years later they are still there having deserted God's ways
  - He had fled to the famine to keep his family from death, but three men end up dead just the same.
- Naomi now separated from God and His people is left with no husband, no sons, no grandchildren and no hope for the future.
  - Its blow after blow tragedy so now what?

#### Naomi's Position

- She is a widow in a foreign land with no hope.
  - There was no social security to keep her alive – that's what sons were for and she no longer had any of those.
- She hears of food returning in Bethlehem so makes the only decision she could – return to her people.
- She has her two daughters-in-law but knows they won't be accepted amongst the Jews so tells them to go back to their homes.
  - Naomi isn't a great witness to God is she
    - She tells her pagan daughters-in-law don't come with me because God is against me.
- She has no hope of another husband or more children for them to marry so she cannot give them what they need to survive – in her view
  - It was the culture of the time that if a married man died his unmarried brother or near relative would marry his wife and continue the brother's name.
    - This is what Naomi is referring to in v11.
    - She thinks it is hopeless for Ruth and Orpah
      - She has forgotten that she has another relative named Boaz who could perform the duty of a brother.
        - We will meet Boaz next time.
- There is a lesson for us here
  - When we have decided that God is against us we usually exaggerate our hopelessness.
    - Rather than it being limited to one situation it encompasses our whole life.
    - We become enveloped in a black cloud and miss the rays of light that make it through.
      - God restored food to Bethlehem and opened the way home for Naomi

- It was God who had Boaz instore to be a kinsman and continue Naomi's family.
- It is God who provided faithful Ruth to stay with Naomi.
  - But she missed all of these good gifts from God in her bitterness.
  - She was so bitter at Gods hard providence that she couldn't see his mercy at work in her life.
    - Don't let the same happen to you.
- Naomi ends up so bitter she changes her name.
  - Naomi's problem is that she has lost sight of the mercies of God.
    - She still believes in God, his sovereignty – she acknowledges God's hand
    - She needs to open her eyes to see the good gifts God has given even during the hard times.

### **Ruth's faithfulness/perseverance**

- I think the writer, who by the way we aren't sure who it is, spend time revealing where Naomi is at, in order to contrast it to faithful Ruth.
  - The two are chalk and cheese
- Naomi in her bitter state tells both Ruth and Orpah to leave.
  - Orpah kisses her goodbye whilst Ruth clings to her and not even a second plea in v 15 works.
  - Naomi gives Ruth a pretty grim description of the future
    - Ruth is determined and adamant she will stay with Naomi no matter the cost.
    - Widowhood and childlessness aren't enough to put her off.
      - Naomi lays out a hopeless future in black and white, Ruth takes her hand and says let's walk into it together.
- Read v16-17 again – these are famous verses.

*But Ruth replied, "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. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." 18 When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.*

- That is commitment and faithfulness right there.
  - For Ruth it means leaving her family and homeland.
  - It means accepting a husbandless, childless life – as far as she knows
  - It means going to an unknown land, with unknown people who have a different language and customs. And worse still where she would not have been accepted.
  - It's a permanent commitment that continues even after Naomi dies
    - Where you die, I will die
      - i.e. I won't even leave after you are dead so I will be buried next to you.
- But all of that is physical. The greatest commitment of all is the "Your God will be my God"

- Naomi has just expressed her bitterness at God and testified to the hand of God being against her
  - In spite of this Ruth rejects her religious pagan past and accepts the God of Israel, the God we worship this morning.
    - Maybe her husband has spoken of God's goodness years before and how he had provided for his people. We don't know.
- But somehow Ruth came to trust in Naomi's God despite Naomi's bitterness and bad experience.
- Ruth's is a picture of God's ideal woman. A woman who has
  - Faith in God to see past the present setbacks no matter how costly they are.
  - Freedom from the ties of this world
  - Courage to follow where he leads
  - Radical commitment and faithfulness in relationships established by God.
- Ruth embodies perseverance through brave, selfless, loving kindness even when facing difficult situations.

### **Naomi fails where Ruth succeeds**

#### **Lessons for us**

##### **1. God's sovereign rule**

- God is the ruler of the whole earth and all the affairs of mankind.
  - He rules the nations, and he rules families (Daniel 2:21)
- Both Naomi and Ruth are great examples for us here
  - Whatever else they doubted they never doubted that God was involved in every part of their lives.
- At the beginning we saw that He gives rain and takes rain
- He gives life and takes life
- God was going to great things through Naomi's family.
  - Don't want to spoil the story but Ruth goes on to marry Boaz.
    - They have a son called Obed who has a son called Jesse.
    - Jesse becomes the father of David who leads Israel to the greatest heights.
      - Who descends from David's line – Jesus
        - The saviour of the world
          - God was going to do great things through this family.
- One of the main messages of this little book is that God is at work in the worst of times. Even through the sins of his people he can, and he does plot for their glory. It was true at the national level. And we will see that it is true at the personal, family level, too. God is at work in the worst of times. When you think he is farthest from you, or has even turned against you, the truth is that he is laying foundation stones of greater happiness in your life.
  - Romans 8:28 is true
- Will you trust in god's sovereign rule?

## 2. God's wonderful providence

- An amazing promise of God is that he will always provide for the needs of his people.
- But sometimes his providence seems very hard – that's true in Naomi's case.
  - You can lay it on the sin of going to Moab and walking away from God but Psalm 34:19 says "many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all". Even the righteous will go through hard times.
- No believer is exempt from affliction in this life but don't allow it to make you doubt God's goodness.
- Suppose Naomi's tragedies were owing to her disobedience then this story is a double encouragement since God turns her story from sorrow to joy, from hopeless to hopeful.
  - Don't ever think your sin puts you out of reach of hope for the future.

## 3. God's good purposes

- We have touched on this already – God is always working for our good
  - Even in discipline.
    - A parent disciplines a child for its good not to hurt them or be a kill joy.

## 4. God's freedom

- Finally, if you put your trust in God and his sovereign goodness and mercy that will follow you all the days of your life then you can live in the same freedom as Ruth.
  - A freedom that means you live sacrificially for God in all areas of your life.
  - A freedom that allows you to leave family, possessions,
  - A freedom that means you can make radical commitments or undertake great ventures.
  - Or a freedom to keep doing what you are doing and persevere through the tough times because you know there is a God who is providing for you and working for your good.

Let us be people who persevere in the hard time and express the joy that it is to know Jesus.