

God's Kindness in Suffering

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[0:00] As we begin, I guess I just wanted to ask if anyone in your family is named Ruth. Anyone? Anyone named Ruth? There's a few, Ruth. Yep, there you go.

Perhaps a middle name, Ruth. It's not a name you hear that often. My grandmother was called Ruth. It's sort of a name of, it's a bit old-fashioned these days. But after this series, I hope you will wonder why more little girls these days aren't called Ruth, given how amazing her story is.

It's a short book of the Bible. It's only four chapters long, and it hides behind the book of Judges. The last verse of the book of Judges is on your screen now.

This is the very last verse of Judges. In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. And in fact, that is the repeated idea throughout Judges.

It was a lawless place of moral chaos. Every man for himself. And if you want to understand what life in Israel was like back then, just cast your mind back. I think, is it two weeks when the power blackout happened?

[1:10] A week and a half, two weeks. Did you drive your car that day? And around Doncaster, particularly that intersection down there, the lights were out for about two days. And when you drive your car where there's a blackout and there are no traffic lights, you really are taking your life in your hands because you drive up, you have to wait for a gap in the traffic, you rely on the kindness of strangers on the road, which is bad.

It's every man for himself. It's very scary. Actually, even more than that, if you really want to understand what life is like in Judges in the time of Israel, cast your mind further back to when COVID started.

Did you go to Woolies and you go to the toilet paper aisle and it was completely empty? Do you remember that? The whole thing was empty. And you thought to yourself, have people lost their minds?

What is going on? What is the world coming to? Well, if you times that by 300 years, you have a sense of what it's like in the time of Judges in Israel when there was no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

The very next verse of the Bible begins the book of Ruth. And Ruth opens with, in the days when the Judges ruled. That means Ruth's Israel was moral chaos.

[2:30] Every man for himself. But here's the thing. After Ruth, the book of Ruth, comes one Samuel. And Samuel is the last of the Judges. And he will anoint.

He will find a new royal family. And there's a slide on your screen for how this works. So Judges, no king in Israel. One Samuel, he anoints the royal family.

And in the middle, we see a little family making their way in the world. So that already gives you a clue as to what is going to happen and where the book of Ruth goes.

The Bible has to bridge the gap between no king in Israel and Samuel starting a royal family as we see the comings and goings of this little family in Ruth.

And so let's meet this little family. Verse 2. Judah, that's a very fancy tribe.

[3 : 34] But it hasn't helped them escape the famine. Bethlehem, that means house of bread, which is ironic given there is no bread there. And so Elimelech, he packs up the family and heads to Moab.

But his own name, Elimelech, his own name means my God is my king. And so his own name should have reminded him where to turn when disaster struck. But instead, he decides to leave the promised land, which is very sinful.

To head for a country like Moab, that is a terrible idea. You see, the last time the Israelites dealt with the Moabites, they were stabbed in the back.

You see, Moab is the neighbor. You pray, puts up the real estate sign and is packing up and going away. If you've got a neighbor like that, well, Moab is that neighbor.

You could imagine how hard life in Israel was that moving to Moab of all places seemed like a good idea. Anyway, by verse 3, Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died.

[4 : 39] And she was left with her two sons. And just as Israel was a mess without a king, so was this little family without Elimelech, the husband and father. Because in verse 4, the sons married Moabite women.

One named Orpah, not Oprah, and the other Ruth. And again, a terrible idea to marry Moabite women. Even sinful, even.

The last time the Israelites took Moabite brides, they left Yahweh and went after the foreign pagan gods of the Moabite wives. And the very next verse, verse 5, both Marlon and Killion also died.

And Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. You see, the focus of chapter 1 is Naomi. And her whole life is summed up by two words in verse 5.

Your Bible says, and Naomi, in verse 5. But the proper translation is, the woman. No homeland, no husband, no sons, no grandchildren.

[5 : 44] She has lost everything. She's just a woman now. What is God doing? If you've been a Christian for any length of time, eventually a tragedy will strike and you'll be right alongside Naomi saying, what is God doing?

It could be a diagnosis or a divorce. It could be depression or a death. This is not what I had planned for my life.

Why is all this happening to me, Lord? What are you doing? Well, if you've ever cried out anything like that, Naomi is the person for you. If anyone has the right to point fingers and blame God, it is her.

We're going to see how the story unfolds. But we'll come back to Naomi at the end. And if you've ever felt completely empty like her, please stay listening for the Bible's answer.

Please keep your passages open. We're at verse 6. When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

[6 : 49] Returning home here means to repent. It's the same word in Hebrew. Not because Naomi was sinful. Her husband actually was the one who dragged them away to Moab.

But the point is, Naomi is doing a 180-degree turn from Moab back to Israel. But as they prepare to return, Naomi thinks that if her daughters-in-law are to have any future, it needs to be away from her.

Verse 11. Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons who could become your husbands? You see, Naomi thinks that she is a lost cause with no future.

Perhaps she saw the famine, her husbands, her sons, and that she was the common denominator, that it was all her fault. Verse 12. Return home, my daughters.

I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me, even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons, would you wait until they grew up?

[7:52] Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me. And Orpah, one of the daughters-in-law, she decides to leave Naomi.

But in verse 14, notice Ruth. Ruth clung to Naomi instead. Naomi says, Look, Ruth, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods.

Go back with her. But this is where Ruth shines. Verse 16. Don't urge me to leave you or turn my 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. You see, even though Ruth is not obligated to, she binds herself to Naomi and the people of God.

And their God will be her God. And these famous verses will define Ruth's life and play a crucial role in God's purposes for his people.

[8:56] Her decision to stick with Naomi is a high point of the whole book. We're meant to cheer, in fact. Verse 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. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her to leave.

You see, Ruth commits to Yahweh, the God of Israel, by the way she loves his people, specifically Naomi. And it's a reminder, her love here, it's a reminder of God's covenant love, which we heard in that Romans passage.

In the New Testament, Paul says, not even death will separate us from the love of God in Christ. And what sets Ruth apart is how costly her devotion is.

You see, she's leaving behind her own family, her own country, her own people, to live in Israel, amongst the people she doesn't know, in a country she's never been, where they're no fan of Moabites.

[10:03] Much less so now, in a time of moral chaos. She's really putting herself in danger. But notice also verse 9. She seems to be giving up a chance of rest in the home of another husband.

Because verse 12, Naomi's too old to provide her any more sons. So as far as Ruth can tell, she's giving up a chance of marriage. She's giving up a chance of motherhood in devotion to Naomi and her God.

This seems to be the sacrifice that Orpah, the other sister-in-law, was not willing to make. From a worldly point of view, it's very foolish, isn't it? But as the story goes on, the Bible thinks that Ruth is a hero.

She's a model of making difficult and costly decisions that are actually godly and right. She's a hero of the faith. We're actually meant to imitate Ruth.

And some of the ways we might imitate her are any action, any decision that looks foolish to the world, but is actually serving the Lord. So it could be people giving up their worldly careers, their worldly futures to go into full-time gospel ministry.

[11:23] It could be choosing singleness or having your in-laws move into your house to take care of them, just like they did in the story. It could mean calling up a family member who you've had a falling out with 40 years ago to be the first one to make the difficult first move and create peace.

It might mean losing friendships that at the end of the day have been just toxic to your Christianity. It means all Christian giving.

Our Thanksgiving Sunday a few weeks ago, we raised so much money. Anything that is difficult and costly, but is godly and right, and you're in the Ruth territory.

And it's hard to say from this chapter alone, it's hard to say why she binds herself to Naomi. After all, she barely knows anything about Naomi's God. But as she departs for Israel, she's also beginning a journey of getting to know Yahweh, the God of Israel, better.

You see, you can learn facts and figures about God from the Bible. You can get to a point where on balance, being a Christian is probably better than not being one. But it takes personal commitment to get you to a place of certainty.

[12:46] And this is what I mean. A few years ago in our church, a couple arrived here. They were a Muslim couple, in fact. And they did the Christianity Explored course with me.

And after that six-week course was over, they stayed to come to church every Sunday. And after a while, the wife said to me, she said, I just don't know enough about Jesus.

There are some things I still need to learn before I commit to him. And I pointed her back to her own marriage. And I said, look at this man you married. On your wedding day, how much, how well did you really know him?

And do you know what she said? She goes, do you know what? Not that well, really. And not that well compared to 20 years later, two sons, 20 years of marriage. Now I know him perfectly well.

And I said, but at the time when you didn't know him that well, you were willing to commit your whole life to him. And it's the same with God. You can reason in your head facts and figures about Jesus.

[13:46] You can get to a point where becoming a Christian is probably a good idea, but only a personal commitment like Ruth starts you on a journey that ends with certainty about who Jesus is.

If you're not a Christian here, if you're not a Christian listening in, maybe some of our family and friends aren't believers, please tell them not to wait until they think they've learned enough about Jesus to convert.

They'll never tick enough boxes in their heart. Like any relationship, it takes personal commitment to get to a place of certainty where you can know the other person perfectly well.

Same with marriage, same with God. For the rest of our time this morning, I want to focus back on Naomi. She's the main character in chapter one.

If Ruth represents the new convert, then Naomi is the seasoned believer, which is all of us in the room. And perhaps like most of us in the room, Naomi has a very complicated relationship with God.

[14:55] She doesn't have a perfect faith. And let me show you what I mean. See, once she had a husband and two sons, her life was sweet. Naomi was her name.

That's what Naomi means. But then they moved to Moab and everyone started dying. And Naomi looks at all the suffering in her life and her only explanation is the end of verse 13, that the Lord's hand has turned against her.

When she finally makes it back from Moab, she says to the people of her hometown, verse 20, don't call me Naomi, call me Mara instead. I was sweet, Naomi, but now the Almighty has made my life very bitter, very Mara.

You see, Naomi thinks that God is against her. Verse 21, 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. Perhaps she feels like God is judging her today for the past sins of the family.

[16:04] Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever thought those things in your life when you see your suffering? Maybe God is judging us today because of past sins in the family.

You see, Naomi, she couldn't see everything that God was doing. She can't see what he's planning for her life. Her depression was so foggy, she misjudged key parts of God's character.

Did you notice that as soon as her husband and sons die in verse 5, the very next verse 6, the Lord comes to the aid of his people? Verse 8, he's the Lord of kindness.

Verse 9, he gives rest. He provides a future. The story starts with a famine in Israel, but verse 22, it ends with a barley harvest in Bethlehem.

God wasn't against Naomi. He was providing for her the whole time. She just couldn't see it. You see, there's something so visceral, so emotional about suffering, that we can't see things clearly.

[17:11] We think wrong things like God is against us or that God is judging us. We misjudge his role in our suffering. But notice Naomi, she doesn't question God's right to do what he wants.

He's the almighty, he's up there and I'm a nothing down here. Andrew and I were debating whether she blames God or not. I wonder if you think she's actually pointing the finger.

I personally don't think she's blaming God because almost all of the chapter is Naomi running back to him instead. As soon as suffering strikes in verse 5, in verse 6 she packs her bags and heads back to God, back to Israel.

She's kind of like a prodigal son, isn't she, returning home to the father. And perhaps that's what her husband Elimelech should have done when the famine first struck.

Turn to God like his own name suggests. He's the king rather than running away to Moab. And I think that's what makes Naomi shine in this passage.

[18:24] I think that's what makes her a model for us today. Despite how bitter her suffering she did verse 22, she returned from Moab to Israel, to the Lord.

And sure, she gets God wrong. She thinks he's against her. Maybe she even thinks that it's all his fault. We're not exactly sure. But at the end of the day, God was coming to the aid of his people.

And even though she gets lots of things wrong, her faith isn't perfect, she always heads in one direction with her pain. That is, she runs to God, not away from him.

We said at the start, if you've been a Christian for any length of time, eventually you'll get to a point where you cry out, what is God doing? And even though we'll be tempted to blame him, even though we'll think he's against us, both of which are wrong, just make sure you do like Naomi.

You run towards him. You head Godward in your direction. In fact, running away from God won't make your suffering any easier to deal with.

[19:39] You won't find any answers away from God. The reason for your suffering is not that God is against you. How can he be when he is coming to the aid of his people?

How can God be judging you when he's already judged Jesus on your behalf? Bad things, tragedies, they will always happen in a world of moral chaos, where it's every man for himself.

We will suffer for our faith in a country that does not acknowledge Jesus as king. It is tough in the day-to-day suffering of life, but if we run away from God, we won't see how he's been using our pain eventually for his purposes and for our good.

As the story continues, Naomi will slowly learn how her suffering fits into the larger plan God has for her life.

I don't want to spoil the ending. I'll leave it for Andrew Price in a few weeks. For the rest of us, there's enough there that we can pray now. So do join me. Father God, thank you that you are not against us, that you come to the aid of your people.

[20:56] And Father, we suffer in this world. We're tempted to point fingers. We're tempted to run away from you. Please, Father God, would we run towards you in our pain.

Please come to our aid. Please comfort us. And Father, please, would we not shake our fingers and run away from you. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.