

What Does it Mean to be Called by God

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[0 : 00] Today we're in the Old Testament. We're looking at the book of Ruth. And again, we're going to consider the story of Ruth from the perspective of God's call.

Now, Ruth has got four chapters to it. And obviously, I didn't have time to go through all of it with you. So what we'll do is we'll look mostly at chapter one and we'll pop in and out. And we'll see how God and his call works in the lives of both Naomi and Ruth.

Now, many of us, of course, know the story of Ruth. It's a delightful story. It's fairly short. Some books in the Old Testament are powerful and obvious.

But this one is so gentle and beguiling that you can easily be fooled into thinking that it's nothing more than a heartwarming story.

But it's a great deal more than that. It has an enormous amount of material to teach us. The charm, the apparent simplicity of the story is, in fact, quite deceptive.

[1 : 14] Ruth has a very carefully articulated plot, like all of the stories of the Old Testament. And the overall movement in the story, there's one idea that we can pin it all on.

That is, from death to life, from barrenness to fullness. That's what happens in the lives of those of us who respond to the call, who hear the voice of Jesus and his word.

And we see how this works itself out in the life of Ruth and, of course, her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Now, the first episode in the story only lasts till around about chapter one, verse 22.

And it's about emptiness. The story is going to be about the reversal of a certain woman's fortune. Her name is Naomi. She's an Israelite. And as we read the story, one of the first striking elements that grabs our attention is the way the characters are brought into the picture, even those who don't really play a real part in the story.

[2 : 34] We have real people, real names, and real places. This serves to anchor our count in time.

Even the towns are named. In other words, we're dealing with real lives. We're dealing with real history. We're not dealing with fairy tales. It's not about a certain nameless man.

It's about this man. Unlike a parable, it is about real people. We come to verse one, and we read, In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem and Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

It's an innocent, factual verse. But as we look over it, we need to ask, Is this all there is? What's going on here?

What's wrong with this verse? Remember, the land of Judah is the promised land given to the Israelites by God.

[3 : 44] He's covenant people, the people who are called by him in the Old Testament. And so the fact that Naomi and her husband have now left God's land because of a famine should get us as astute readers to ask the question, Well, why?

Why are they leaving the land? Is it because of a famine? Well, what about trusting God, the God who calls?

If God calls, does he provide? That's the question. Were they leaving the land simply because of the famine?

What about their relationship with God? Is God not capable of providing for his people? If he calls them, will he not provide in a time of a famine?

In fact, normally in the Old Testament, when there was a famine in the land, it was a sign of God testing his people. Testing the trust of his people.

[4 : 54] Will you trust me if I am capable of calling you, bringing you into a relationship with me? Can you not trust me?

Like much of the stories of the Bible, there's more to what's going on here than meets the eye. Now, Ruth goes down to Moab, which is essentially a non-Christian country, and tragedy strikes from verse 3 to verse 5 of chapter 1.

She's made destitute. We see this decline into destitution. And yet the writer of the story tells the story so dispassionately, without emotion.

He just lays out what happened. She and her husband go down to this land, to Moab, for a while. But for a while is going to turn out to be 10 years.

And then we come, as we read the account, we come to Naomi's tragedy. Her family members die.

[6:09] It's a terrible story. Many of us here have lost loved ones, can identify with the tragedy.

Everyone dies except for her daughters-in-law, who are from that particular country.

They are not from Israel. And Naomi is left at the end, having lost everything because of her circumstances.

Then we come to Naomi's bitter advice, which is essentially amounting to something like this, Ruth, go back to your gods, my daughter-in-law.

God can't help you. 1 verse 15. So Naomi is pretty devastated by what has happened. We can get a picture of the hopelessness in her words from chapter 1, verse 9 to 15.

You'll also observe that now that she's lost everything, even the prospect of going home to the land of God's people, the land of the call, doesn't really seem to interest her.

[7:16] It presents no real hope to her whatsoever. I'm really quite struck by the advice she gives to her daughter-in-law in verse 15.

It's not so much go back to your own family or your own land, but it's go back to your own gods.

That tells us a lot about Naomi as an Israelite.

Tells us a lot about her spiritual state at this time. No hope at all. There's no hope coming back to God's land.

There's no hope hearing God's word, answering God's call, even for her unbelieving non-Jewish daughters-in-law.

And so ultimately, Naomi and Ruth return to Judah, as we will see. But has Naomi really returned from verse 19 to verse 22?

[8:12] The name Naomi, as some of us know, means sweet. But the first episode ends with her now reluctantly returning from around verse 19 to Bethlehem.

Now this marks her physical return. She's returned to God's land of the call, God's land of his people, the land of promise.

But look at her bitterness, her bitter speech from verse 20 to verse 21. Basically, she says, she went from the land full, now she's come back, but she's come back empty, and in her mind it's all God's fault.

She goes far as saying, call me Mara, call me bitter. Not sweet. I'd rather be called bitter.

And once more, this statement opens a window into her personal walk with the Lord. It strongly suggests that things are not going well with her soul.

[9:24] She has returned to the people of God, to the land of God's people, but her heart hasn't returned. Her heart remains bitter.

Her heart remains far from God. You see, outwardly we learn from this account that we can be part of the church. We can, it would seem, be part of the people of God, but inwardly, perhaps due to circumstances, tragedy, anger, and bitterness, we're actually in exile from God.

We haven't really answered the call of the gospel. I think that's the case here with Naomi. Look at the way she speaks of the treatment that she's received at the Lord's hand.

Scattered there from around about verse 13 to 21. For example, verse 13, the Lord's hand has gone out against me. A little bit later on, same chapter, verse 21, The Lord, the Almighty, has made my life very bitter.

The Lord has brought me back empty. Strong language. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.

[10:46] And yet, our author would have us ask, has the Lord really brought Naomi back empty? See, Naomi's own worst enemy.

We sometimes know people like that. Sometimes we are people like that. She cannot get around her self-pity when we often suffer setbacks in life.

The danger is that we will allow them to turn us into bitter people. We will not be able to hear the voice of God, to answer God's call in our lives, to serve him, to serve the gospel. And we're also not able to perceive the seeds of recovery that God might well plant in our lives. One can hardly fail to detect Naomi's accusations and her self-pity.

But has God brought her back to the land empty? That's the question. The term empty devalues her daughter-in-law.

[11 : 52] What about Ruth, who insists that she will not be parted from her mother-in-law? What about Ruth? Ruth, Ruth, her daughter-in-law, who has lost, given away everything to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi.

See, little does Naomi know that the same daughter-in-law, which she quietly ignores, will pave the way to her rehabilitation and her ultimate return to the Lord.

In the story, the idea of to turn back or to return occurs 12 times in the chapter.

12 times. Now what happens when we go through hard times? For many of us, we lose our loved ones, or we suffer financially.

Many of us have had difficult times over this last year. So, often we're given to temptation to blame God. It's God's fault. But the word, to return, as I say, to turn back, the idea of turning back occurs 12 times in the chapter.

[13 : 08] What's going on with that? Remember I said to you in those days, they would repeat an idea in the Old Testament to catch your attention. See, the repeated use of return indicates that something else is going on here.

There's something going on that's more than just this idea of a physical return journey from Moab to Judah. There's a significance when we realize that the term, the Hebrew word for return, is often used in the prophets for repentance.

a change of heart towards God, a change of mind, a returning and accepting the call of the gospel and the call of God.

But has Naomi really repented? She's returned. Physically, it's true. But what about repentance? That is what our writer would ask.

Has her heart responded to the call of God's love and his covenant? Has her heart, as we would say in the New Testament era, has her heart returned to Christ after her loss?

[14 : 23] That's our question. What blessings we miss out on when we don't live amongst God's people. Remember, she spent 10 years in a non-Christian country.

And it's not only her destitution that brings her back to the land, but, of course, she's heard about God's blessings. In the meantime, while she's been away, God has provided for his people in 1 verse 6 by bringing them food, you see, because when God calls, he does provide.

And this creates a great distance between Naomi and her homeland, between her and the people of the Lord.

But now, God has provided for his people in the harvest, and because Naomi is not there, she misses out on God's blessings.

You know, guys, that happens when we become bitter and we turn our backs on God in the midst of tragedy. We stop coming to church. We turn away from fellowship and the call of God in our lives, and we miss out on his many blessings and the healing that is available.

[15 : 38] You know, God sustains us. God lifts us up and fills us and heals us through the fellowship of the church, the covenant of God's people. But Naomi has wandered away from God's call in the church.

And you know, guys, that's her real tragedy. Yes, it is a tragedy. It's a terrible tragedy that she lost her husband and she lost her sons.

It is a terrible, terrible tragedy, but the greatest tragedy in her life is the fact that she's lost fellowship. She's moved away from fellowship of God's people, the call of the gospel.

We need fellowship. We need to be part of the church. That is her greatest tragedy. And when we now, for a moment, turn to look at Ruth, what a contrast to Naomi.

Ruth comes from a non-Christian home. She comes from a non-Christian country. But look at her incredible choice in 1 verse 16. Your God will be my God.

[16 : 51] She doesn't just want to go back with her mother-in-law because she misses her mother-in-law. She doesn't want to be without her mother-in-law. No. She wants to adopt the call.

She perceives the call of the God of Israel in her life. Your God will be my God. We must see the spiritual truths that are here in the story.

One of the reasons why we must look out for them is because there is no great signs of God doing anything. God seems to be pretty much silent in the book of Ruth just like he often seems to be in our lives.

There are great miracles from God from heaven in Ruth. It's all very, very quiet and everyday. The events are rather mundane.

God doesn't really seem to be at work at all but we need to read carefully. Your God will be my God. So she insists in returning not only with Naomi but she wants to take Jesus as her own God.

[18 : 07] She wants to respond to the call of the gospel, to the call of the covenant. She's more positive about Naomi's Jewish God than Naomi is.

You can see that Ruth has learned somehow about the God of Israel and as we saw just how attractive Jesus' call is last week, we see the same power of attraction here in the life of Ruth. But Naomi, well, she won't be consoled. Naomi's really a miserable sad case. I will never get myself out of this mess.

You see that from chapter 1 from verse 11 to 13. As far as Naomi can see, there is no light on the horizon. Sometimes when we get into difficult situations, we go through unexpected tragedy and hardship, we can feel the same.

Perhaps as you face 2023, that's how you feel. A year with no real light on your horizon, whatever that might be. As far as Naomi is concerned, there are no marriage prospects in Israel, and she seems to almost be blind to Ruth's kindness.

[19 : 33] You notice that? It's almost as if Ruth doesn't exist. She's so focused on herself. Now they come back to the land, and we move now in the story from emptiness and sadness, towards fullness and blessing.

As we come to the land, as we move back to the call of God's people, the covenant of God's people, we move now into a sense of fullness and blessing, and that actually goes on for three chapters.

So the sadder part of the book covers the first part, when she's in Moab. Now she comes back, and the second episode begins with the subtle signs that God has not forgotten Naomi, from chapter 1, verse 22.

But it's not obvious. Again, it's a very, very everyday, simple little story. God doesn't really seem to be superficially at work, much like our lives.

Now, although Naomi cannot see beyond it, the end of this first episode, the sadder episode, is also the beginning of a new episode in her life.

[20 : 59] Now the two women arrive back in Judah. When do they come back? Well, it just so happens to be by coincidence. Is it really a coincidence? coincidence?

They come back at precisely that moment when there is the beginning of the harvest in 1, verse 22. Is that just a coincidence? Well, we know that God works behind the scenes of the everyday to call these people to himself.

Is this a coincidence? No, it's not. Harvest is a sign of fullness, destitution, famine. As they come back to the fellowship of God's people, the famine is over.

And God's unexpected path to healing and renewal is what? Well, it's the handsome stranger, Boaz.

Chapter 2 from verse 1 to verse 23. And again, he's just sort of a, seems to be a nice guy, but he's just another everyday guy, isn't he? Not at all.

[22 : 05] So after the emptiness of the first episode, we've got this wonderful change. They're back at church. Now we have this episode of fullness and plenty.

The harvest is the first symbol of plenty, and of course the second is the relative of Boaz whose harvest it is. Now what would sometimes happen in those days if your brother's wife died, you as the brother-in-law would sometimes look after and even marry your brother's wife to provide her with a home due to her destitution and her losing her husband.

Now the Bible tells us that Boaz is a man of standing, he's a man of quality, and he's a relative of Naomi's husband Ruth in chapter 2 and verse 1.

We've got in fact this wonderful scene of blessings and plenty, even in the language, and into this situation wonders Ruth.

You'll observe that Naomi is so depressed she can't take any action at all. Normally the ladies are very good at setting up a date.

[23 : 26] Ruth, look at that guy. Let's see if we can't get you set up on a blind date. But nothing like that at all. Naomi is so depressed she doesn't take any action at all.

And so in the count the initiative passes to Ruth while Naomi, while she retires herself putting into the background. But God is not done with Naomi.

And we've got another wonderful word in the story that appears more than once, and that is a very special Hebrew word. It's chesed. It's a special word because it means a certain kind of loving kindness.

It's translated as kindness, which is fine in English, but it means more than that it speaks about the kindness of the God who calls us to be his own.

It's the kind of love that loves beyond the deserts of the one who is loved. It's the kind of love that will endure anything to rescue and love and care for the one who is loved.

[24 : 41] It's a kind of love that only God really shows towards his people. It's the kind of love that reaches its climax on the cross of Jesus Christ.

It's the kind of love that will endure and destroy the powers of the devil, darkness, and sin in order to rescue and be with the one who is loved.

loved. That's the meaning of that very special word chesed. Now again, God doesn't appear in the story really, but 90% of the time, this term chesed, as I've said, always refers to God's presence and love.

And when Boaz speaks of God rewarding Ruth because of her willingness to support Naomi, uses this word.

So we read, for example, may you be, may the Lord repay you for what you have done, may you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, in 2 verse 12.

[25 : 54] You've got this overpowering language of love and kindness, now that they're back. You realize as a reader, wow, what are these guys been missing?

Boaz is a guy who cannot stop talking about God. He cannot stop talking about the love of Jesus, as we would say in the 21st century.

Here you got a guy who's just got the name of God and God's love and the gospel all the time on his lips. Ruth is completely amazed.

Chapter 2 verse 10. Where does all of this chesed come from? Where does all of this kindness come from? I don't deserve it because clearly the kindness of Boaz is the kindness of God behind the scenes.

Just like when we look at our lives, our lives often seem to be very simple in every day and yet God's kindness is there all the time.

[26 : 59] Boaz is this godly man with a great sense of kindness and generosity. What a heart. He allows Ruth to enter into his fields during the harvest.

He allows her to help herself to the barley left over and harvested by his workers. Boaz gives her food and water and draws her into his social group and he sends her home with plenty of provisions to give to Naomi.

There is a love, there is a generosity here that is extravagant. It is the love of God. You know, I preached the sermon at the college some weeks ago and after I preached the sermon, one of our wonderful students, Yok, from South Sudan, came up to me with tears in his eyes and he said, you know, I want to share with you a story and he said, my mother and we as children were starving in South Sudan and there was a time in our lives where we would actually go onto the fields and glean some of the harvest that was left over in order for us to survive and that was also due to the generosity of a South Sudanese farmer.

I couldn't believe it. see how meaningful the story was to Yok. But it should also be powerful for us, this extravagant. Boaz is such an extravagant man.

He instructs his men to draw out some stalks for her to leave behind on the field, for her to pick up. In other words, Boaz not only observes the letter of the Old Testament law, but he observes the spirit of the law, which is what?

[28 : 52] Well, Jesus taught us that. Love your neighbor as yourself. And this now is the beginning of the relationship between Ruth and Boaz and it blossoms into marriage.

What a wonderful story. Wonderful story for the beginning of 2023. I love the fact that now Naomi wakes up. Look at chapter 2 from verse 19.

All of a sudden, Naomi realizes her circumstances have changed and she changes herself. She realizes that now that she's back and she's come back to the people of God, she sees the growing relationship between Boaz and Ruth and now she sees the Lord in a whole new light and pronounces a double blessing upon Ruth.

She can't stop talking about God's love and blessing. It's wonderful. Look at 2 verse 19. Blessed be the man who took care of you. Verse 20.

Blessed be he by the Lord who has not abandoned his chesed, his kindness towards the living and the dead. You see there? And the dead. Isn't that amazing when I read that?

[30 : 08] God's kindness still extends to those who are no longer with us. There's a sense in which God's kindness moves beyond life and death.

She added that man is closely related to us. He's one of our kinsmen redeemers. 2 verse 20. She realizes now that there is indeed a prospect of marriage.

Do we see as we look at this wonderful story the kindness of God in other people? Yes, your life might be pretty average and everyday and mundane like mine, but do you see the kindness of God in the kindness of others?

Naomi has changed completely. She who numbered herself amongst the dead lives again and at last in the kindness of Boaz she perceives the kindness of Yahweh.

Friends, this is so important. Do we ourselves perceive the kindness of God in the generosity of others?

[31 : 14] Was it by chance that Ruth found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz? Not at all. Is it a coincidence that the name of Yahweh is on the lips of Boaz almost at once and that it occurs in every single greeting and blessing that he makes?

Not at all. God can call us with trumpets and with a great fanfare. Jesus can walk by the sea of Galilee as we saw last week and call his disciples.

But his call to us in everyday simple banal circumstances is just as effective. You mustn't forget that.

Boaz lands up filling Ruth's emptiness but he fills Naomi's as well. The climax of the plot.

When does the climax come? 4 verse 13. So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife and she gave birth to a son.

[32 : 25] That could be the climax. climax. Or maybe the climax of the story is 4 from verse 16 to verse 17. Consider this very carefully.

Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The woman there said, Naomi has a son.

So beyond even this there's a further climax perhaps. Because it says they called him Obed and he's the father of Jesse, the father of David, who of course is the great ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a story of God's call in the gospel before the time. Now David of course only comes later. He doesn't participate in the story, but he's the rationale for it.

He's the reason for it. Because it is through the blessing, the chesed blessing of a woman who had lost everything that God would bring about the greatest sign of his kindness to all and that is the death of Jesus on the cross.

[33 : 41] I read this out last week and let me read it out again as we move to a conclusion. God works for the good in the lives of those who trust him and those who are called even not in the way that we expect or want.

God can use broken people to do great things. So for those of us in our church meeting today who are broken or those of us who have lost loved ones or those of us who have lost love and are looking for love, those of us who wonder whether they'll ever find love and fullness again, I think the book of Ruth answers us all, will you like Ruth be willing to place yourself under the protection of Yahweh's wings?

Who knows when God will fill you again? And yet God works in the lives of these people, calling them in such a quiet way, and yet he works nevertheless.

Finally, we come to that point in the story, the only point where the word love appears for the first and only time. 4 verse 15, for your daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better to you than

seven sons has given him birth.

What a remarkable statement in a society that treasured sons more than anything else. That is what God does. When we answer his call, we put our hand in the hand of Jesus, he fills our emptiness in the gospel.

[35 : 33] So let's bow as we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

to bring fullness where there is emptiness. Let's do that now in our hearts. In all things God works for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose.
Amen.