

Love Lost and Found

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[0 : 00] Now let's open up our Bible to the book of Ruth. We're not going to look at all of it. It's four chapters. It's quite a lot of material, even though we know the story quite well.

But we're going to have a look at the story of the book of Ruth today, and the title I've given is simply Love, Lost and Found.

Love, Lost and Found, and we will have a look at the material there that God has given to us. Now, as we know, there are some books in the Bible, and there are some books in the New Testament that are very powerful, that are very obvious.

There are some books in the Old Testament that have God doing all kinds of miraculous and wonderful things, and God's presence and power is very, very obvious.

But that wasn't actually the daily experience, I suspect, of the life of the Israelite in the Old or the New Testaments.

[1 : 12] And it's interesting that the story starts up by saying, in the days of the book of Judges, the story takes place.

Now, in the days of the book of Judges, those days were terrible days. Those were days of violence, lawlessness, murder, very much like our day.

And that's important for us to understand, because it shows us that even in the worst times, God is still doing his thing.

And the gospel is still at work. But unlike so many other books in the Bible where God is seemingly doing the most powerful things, like our lives in the Bible where God is still doing the most powerful things, God is still doing the most powerful things.

The book of Judges, or the book of Jerusalem, should I say, it's so gentle. It's a beguiling type of story.

[2 : 21] God doesn't really speak, really. I mean, he doesn't really send a prophet. We're easily fooled, aren't we, if we know the story, into thinking that it is simply a heartwarming story, which of course it is.

But the charm, like much of Old Testament narrative, the charm and the apparent simplicity of the story is in fact quite deceptive.

And as I've been saying to you over the years, like all of Old Testament narrative, Ruth is a very, very, very carefully shaped and articulated plot, shaped for us by the mind of God.

Now the overall movement of the story, four chapters, the overall theme, the overall movement, is from death to life.

We've got to get that down first. And our first episode, therefore, starts with, in a sense, death.

[3 : 42] Death or emptiness from 1, chapter 1, verse 1 to 22. It's a story about Naomi and her destitution.

That's what it's about. And a striking element in the story is the way the characters are portrayed and how they've been brought into the picture.

Even those who don't really play much of a role in the story. You've got Elimelech, you've got Machlong, you've got Kilian, you've got Orpah.

You've got the naming of these people. And what that does is it anchors the story in time.

It's real. It's a real story. You've got the names of towns that are laid before us. So in other words, it's not a parable.

[4 : 51] It's not like one of Jesus' parables where Jesus will say, there was a certain man about this man, for example.

We've got a story here about people like us. Real people. Real tragedy.

Real events. Now let's have a look at chapter 1, verse 1. And if you've got your Bible open in front of you, what's wrong with this verse?

It says, 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.

Now remember that Judah is the promised land. Israel, Judah, is not just any old country. It is God's land. It is God's gift.

[5 : 58] It is God's inheritance. It is God's gift to his people. And there's a famine in the land. And the fact that Naomi and her husband left the people of God, left the church, because of a famine, asks us a question.

Because the Bible wants us to think. The question is, were they really just leaving the land because of the famine?

What about God? What about trusting in God? Hasn't the Bible said that God will provide for his people in the land?

Especially in times of famine. And not only that, in the Old Testament, especially in the prophets, famine is normally always something that God brings upon his people to test their faith.

So this is no normal leaving of Judah going on here. And this is no normal famine.

[7 : 24] There's a lot of subtlety in that first verse. Clearly they don't trust in his power to provide. There's more to their departure than meets the eye.

And of course it's a terrible story. It's very, very tragic, is it not? It's tragic.

That's all we can say. Life is tragic. It can be. It can be tragic. How many of us are in tragedy right now?

Due to illness, suffering, financial issues, of course, relationships. How about depression? How about struggling with a sense of carrying on in life and getting up in the morning?

Do you know that's the great killer in the West at the moment, ironically, with all the toys that we've got, as Dylan said. The terrible, terrible scourge of depression.

[8 : 34] We live in a broken world, do we not? Naomi loses everything and she's made destitute. Ruth 1, 3-5.

We see this terrible decline. But the story, the writer tells it to us so dispassionately, it's without emotion.

She and her husband went down to Moab for a while. And I remember the Moabites were wicked people. They were pagans. They were godless people. They were Israel's enemies.

They were Canaanites. They went down to Moab for a while. So they became Moabites. And the while, the while there, verse 1, lengthens, in verse 4-2, 10 years.

And then we come to Naomi's tragedy. Her family members die, except for her daughters-in-law. And Naomi is left at the end, having lost everything because of her circumstances.

[9 : 47] And you'll observe her bitter advice to her Ruth, to her daughters-in-law, go home. But more than that, go back to your gods.

You see that? 1 verse 15. My God's a loser. My God can't help you.

You go back to your gods. So we can see the utter destitution, the misery in Naomi's words.

There's something wrong here spiritually. Ruth 1 from 9 to 15. You'll observe that even the prospect of returning to the promised land that God gave to Israel presents no real hope for her either.

Go back to your gods. Go home. Go back. Stay in Moab. There's nothing special anymore for Naomi about being amongst God's people.

[11 : 01] There's no hope. Even going back to God's land. Even for her unbelieving non-Jewish daughters-in-law.

And ultimately Naomi, as we know, and Ruth, well, they return to Judah. But, once again, with all the subtlety of the Old Testament, the question is asked, has Naomi really returned?

Chapter 1 from verse 19 to verse 22. Naomi, as many of us know, means sweet. The first episode ends with her arrival back in Jerusalem from verse 19 in chapter 1.

It marks her physical return. She has returned physically to God's land of promise. But look at the bitterness in her speech.

From verse 20 to verse 21. The bitterness. Such a terrible thing, is it not? Being bitter over things that have been done to us in the past.

[12:15] Pains that haven't been resolved. People that have angered us. Family feuds. Never been resolved. Anger with God.

Observe the bitterness in her speech. 2021. She went away, but the Lord has brought her back. She went away full. But she came back empty.

And in her own mind, it's God's fault. It's like that with many of us, is it not? It's all God's fault. And then, call me bitter.

What does Naomi mean? Sweet. Call me bitter. Not sweet any longer. I'm no longer fit to be called sweet.

Call me marah. Call me bitter. Call me bitter. In other words, the statement opens up a window into her personal walk with God.

[13:16] And it strongly suggests that things are not going well. She's returned to God's people, but her heart remains bitter.

Her heart remains in exile. Great lesson to be learned there, is there not? Outwardly, we can be part of the church. Outwardly, we can be part of the congregation.

Outwardly, we can be involved. But inwardly, we can be in exile from God. I wonder how many of us here on this winter's morning, that's true.

I'm here outwardly. But inwardly, my heart has long since abandoned the gospel, and I've slipped away from the truth.

And I'm following the gods of Moab and the gods of this world. It could be you. To turn back, by the way, return, return, occurs 12 times in the original, in this chapter, in chapter 1.

[14:29] To return. To turn back. To return. To return. To return. Remember in the Bible, that's how they catch your attention. How do they catch your attention in the Old Testament?

Repetition. To return. To return. To return. To return. Clearly, and you're sick of it. What happens when we go through hard times?

Well, we lose our loved ones. We've seen. It's God's fault. We blame God. But the word again, to return, to return back, is used 12 times in this chapter.

And this repeated use of return indicates something else is going on here. Something else beyond the mere intention to describe a return journey, as we have seen.

It takes on a particular significance when it is recognized that the term to return also in the prophets means repentance.

[15:30] To return in the Old Testament also means to go through a change of heart. It's almost about conversion, we would say, as Christians.

It's a change of heart towards God. But has Naomi really repented?

Has she really returned? That is what the writer is asking with a repetition. Has her heart returned to God after her loss?

We also learn what blessings we miss out on when we don't live amongst God's people. It's not merely Naomi's destitution that brings her back to the land, but her hearing in the land of Moab where the Lord has provided for his people by bringing them food.

She finds out while she is in Moab, she finds out that God has given the people food. Now this creates a sense of great distance, does it not?

[16:51] A distance between Naomi and her homeland. She hears the news. There's a distance between her and God's people.

She wasn't there when it happened. Now that often happens when we do become bitter and turn our backs on God.

In our tragedy we become bitter, we become separate from the people of God, separate from his blessings and healing. Naomi has left the church.

That's what the story is all about. you see that's the real tragedy in the story. Believe it or not, it's not actually about the loss of her sons, as tragic as that is, and her other daughter-in-laws who remain behind.

That's tragic indeed, but that is not the real tragedy of the story. The real tragedy of the story is that she has left the church.

[17:58] she has left the fellowship of God's people. We need that, folks. We need to be sustained by the word of God.

We need to be sustained by the fellowship of God's people, even on a cold winter's morning. We need that as much as we need life itself.

But look at Ruth, look at her incredible choice. Now, Ruth is a pagan, so we would think. She's a Moabite, worships idols, demons.

Your God will be my God, 1 verse 16. That is truly, that is truly absolutely remarkable.

That is truly remarkable. She insists on returning home with Naomi, Naomi, but it is not merely a desire to go back with her, but to take the Lord Yahweh, to take Christ as her own savior in New Testament terminology.

[19 : 12] 1 verse 16. In fact, Ruth is more positive as a Moabite test about Naomi's Jewish God than Naomi is.

saved. What does that tell us? It tells us quite probably that Ruth is saved. That Ruth knows the Lord.

But Naomi, well, she's never going to be consoled. Chapter 1 from verse 11 to verse 13. I'll never get myself out of this mess.

It's over for me. Don't even bother to come back. I can't have sons. I'm too old. As far as Naomi can see, it's over.

We can come to that point, can't we, in life? Whatever circumstances life might serve us, it is possible, is it not, to come to a point in your life where you feel that all is over, that I have reached the end for whatever reason.

[20 : 26] My prospects are over, my marriage prospects are over. 11 to verse 13. She seems to be completely blind to Ruth, Ruth's kindness.

Then we come to the second episode of the story from chapter 1 from around about verse 22 and there are subtle signs that God, of course, has not forgotten Naomi.

There's been no voice from heaven, there's been no prophet. There's no obvious signs that God is doing a thing. In fact, if anything, the signs are that God has neglected Naomi and Ruth.

Although Naomi cannot see beyond it, the end of this episode is also the beginning of a new one in her life. The end of the misery is the beginning of a new episode in her life.

And the two destitute women arrive at the beginning of the harvest. Beginning of the harvest.

[21 : 37] 1 verse 22. Isn't that interesting? At the beginning of the harvest in Judah, in Israel, they come back.

Now, that's no coincidence. Harvest is a sign of emptiness. No, of course not. It's a sign of fullness. The famine is over. So, that's the first sign. The subtle sign that God has not forgotten Naomi.

See, that's how God works in our lives, for the most part. Many churches regard the fact that if God is working their miracles and incredible things happen and I can drive 550,000 miles in my Toyota and my tank won't run out and things like that.

But the reality of the matter is that God, 99% of the time, just works through our daily, sometimes even boring everyday events. The first sign that things are starting to change is the famine.

[22 : 48] What is the second sign? Whoa, the second sign is the handsome stranger, Boaz. God's unexpected path to healing.

Boaz. Now we see, enter the handsome stranger, Boaz, from chapter 2, 1 to 23. So after the emptiness of the first episode comes an episode of fullness, of plenty.

The first is the harvest itself, the second is Boaz, whose harvest it is. And it turns out that Boaz is no normal guy. Boaz is quite a big shot.

He's a man of standing, he's a leader in the community. And he is a relative of Naomi's husband in Ruth chapter 2 and verse 1.

So into this scene of plenty ventures Ruth. Naomi is still too miserable and too depressed to take any action that is required, so the initiative from chapter 2 verse 2 has to pass to Ruth and Naomi is so miserable that she retires her self-pity into the darkness and into the background.

[24 : 14] Now there's another wonderful and important word in the story that appears many, many times, the word translated as kindness or loving kindness, chesed.

chesed. But that isn't really a perfect translation. Chesed means so much more than just kindness. Chesed in the Bible is a very, very, very, very powerful word about God's love.

Okay, God doesn't really appear in the story, I've said that, but 90% of the time this term chesed in the Bible always means God's loving kindness that is overwhelming.

In the Bible, chesed, it means God's loving kindness that will treat Israel far better than she really deserves.

It's the kind of kindness that will fulfill not only Israel's obligations in the government but also God's.

[25 : 27] We see that on the cross. Really, chesed is the cross. That's what chesed is. And chesed now comes increasingly into the story because Boaz is constantly speaking of God rewarding Ruth because of her willingness to support Naomi.

Verse 12 of chapter 2. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel. And Ruth is amazed.

Where does all of this chesed, where does all of this kindness, chapter 2, verse 10, come from?

And clearly the kindness of Boaz is the kindness of God behind the scenes.

Sometimes we forget to see that. That God might not say something directly into our lives but the kindness of God is working through people.

Boaz is this, I mean, Boaz is an amazing man. He's a godly Israelite who's got a great sense of kindness and generosity. He allows Ruth to enter into his fields during the harvest to help herself to the barley left over and harvest by his workers.

[26 : 55] Boaz gives her food and water, draws her into his social group, sends her home with plenty of provisions to give to miserable old Naomi. Naomi. There's generosity here.

There is a generosity here that is extravagant. It's beyond extravagance. Boaz even instructs his men to pull some of the stalks for her from the barley field to leave behind in the field for her to pick up.

I see the law said that because of the poor in the land, the law said that when you harvested, you needed to leave one or two little kernels left behind.

But Boaz goes beyond that. Boaz doesn't just observe the letter of the law, but Boaz observes the spirit of the law, which is love your neighbor as yourself.

and this is the beginning. This is the beginning of the relationship between Ruth and Boaz soon to blossom into marriage.

[28 : 16] And then all of a sudden, Naomi wakes up. Bang! And when the ladies wake up, they really do wake up. Chapter 2, verse 19.

You know, when it comes to the things of the heart, there are very few things the ladies don't know about. I know that at the college. If I want to know who's dating who, just ask one of the ladies. They'll tell you that student is going out of that student, that one is going out of that one. Naomi wakes up. Boy, does she wake up. Chapter 2, verse 19. Now, Naomi just changes completely. Her dire circumstances, well, those are a thing of the past. She now sees this growing relationship between Boaz and Ruth, and she sees the Lord in a new light, and she pronounces it suddenly, this double blessing on Ruth.

2, verse 19. Blessed be the man who took care of you. Wow, is this the same woman? Blessed be he by the Lord who has not abandoned his chesed, his kindness, his chesed towards the living and the dead.

[29 : 37] That amazed me. Verse 20. God has not forgotten the dead. But even those who have tragically passed away in the plans of God in the story are not forgotten by God.

They have their purpose. It's not forgotten those who have passed away. And she added, that man is closely related to us as one of our kinsmen redeemers, or go owls, in 2, verse 20.

Now in Israelite times, if you were one of two brothers and your brother's wife died, then you could have the obligation to marry your brother's wife, because in the Old Testament, remember, if you were a woman in the Old Testament without a husband, you were nothing, you would be destitute. We don't understand that. Why is it such a big deal for Naomi? Why the sadness? Why all the sorrow? Why the drama? Get a job, man. We are living in a different day.

In the culture of the Old Testament, if you were a woman, you needed a man. Without a man, you were nothing. You had no hope. You would starve to death, literally. So we see the kindness of God in the kindness of others, don't we?

[30 : 52] Do we? I mean, do we do that? Do we see the kindness of God in the kindness of others?

That's the point. 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. I want you to see that. She perceives the kindness of Yahweh in the kindness of Boaz.

This is so important. Do we perceive the kindness of God in the generosity of others? Was it by pure chance that Ruth found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz?

2 verse 3. Is it a coincidence that the name of Yahweh is almost at once on Boaz's lips? Ruth 2 verse 4. In fact, Boaz can't stop talking about Yahweh.

[32 : 00] Have you noticed that? It's may the Lord, may the Lord bless you, Yahweh this, Yahweh that, Yahweh this, Yahweh that. I mean, Boaz can't stop talking about what we would say in the New Testament, Jesus Christ.

Boaz is not only a man of standing, but he is crazy about God. Yahweh is almost at once on Boaz's lips in chapter 2 verse 4 and continues to occur in almost every single greeting and blessing that he makes.

And so Boaz lands up filling up Ruth's emptiness but fills Naomi's as well. And the climax of the plot of course occurs and I quote 4 verse 13 so Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife and she gave birth to a son 4 verse 13 but you know what that's not the climax.

Do you know what the real climax is? Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap and cared for him and the woman there said Naomi has a son.

Isn't that amazing? But even beyond this there is a further climax as it says and they named him Obed and of course we know he's the father of Jesse the father of David who is the descendant the ancestor of Jesus Christ.

[33 : 41] Now David 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 of a woman who had lost everything that God also brought about the greatest sign of his kindness to us all the birth of Jesus Christ the cross David is in the line of Christ Christ so God works for the good and the lies of those who trust him but not in the way we expect or even want that's important for those of us who are broken in our meeting today those who have lost loved ones those who have been divorced those who have been hurt those here today who wonder whether they'll ever find love and healing and fullness again the book of Ruth answers will you like Ruth be willing to place yourself under the protection of Christ's wings to use a

New Testament way of talking about the Old Testament will you today whatever your circumstances before you leave be willing to say I am going to place myself under the protection of Yahweh's wings who knows how God will fill you again and look at the blessing bestowed by the woman pronounced on Naomi and Obed for your daughter in law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons has given him birth Ruth 4 verse 15 now that is one of the most remarkable statements in the story because in that society nothing was more treasured than sons and the theme is focused down to the baby in Naomi's lap he will renew her life and sustain her in her old age and he is

Yahweh's gift to her remarkable statement your daughter in law is better to you than seven sons God has replaced emptiness with fullness that's what God does that's what God will do in your life when you surrender your soul to Christ he will replace the misery and the darkness and the hopelessness with light love and now in the final blessing of the woman for the first time in the entire story the word love is used of course it's the love of God is it not your daughter in law loves you but the real love is the love of Christ your daughter in law who loves you for verse 15

Naomi was much of the time not a very lovable woman but Ruth loved her anyway it was the one besides Naomi all the time while she was whining and moaning and hardly ever noticed it was the one beside Naomi all the time ultimately becomes God's instrument to bring her restoration and she was so full of herself and her own self pity that she never even saw it Ruth's love reminds us of the love of Christ again the meaning of the word chesed here seen in the kindness of Boaz to Ruth the kindness of Ruth to Naomi and the kindness of course of Yahweh and the Lord Jesus to them all and yet

God's work in the lives of these people is performed as we move towards a conclusion in such a quiet way once again where are the miraculous interventions Lord how many must ask this question no miraculous interventions by God no inspired prophetic interpreters or spokespersons the story is entirely everyday domestic in character but it shows us that God is advancing his purposes in the lives of people who are willing to take him as their God we look at our church we look at the activities of our church the daily cycle the weekly cycle of bible studies and breaks during the holidays the announcements from Nick and the announcements from Dylan the same old St.

[38 : 45] Mark stuff rather go down the road with the stained glass windows and the miracles I've had people say that to me we love your church I said thank you we leaving your church oh why there no miracles but you see here God advances his purposes in the lives of people who are willing to take him as their God and God works in our lives whether in moments of great signs and

miracles he can do that but more so in my opinion in the quietness of our everyday lives when there are no obvious signs of God that's how God works don't be fooled the Lord is my shepherd oh Lord how are you going to be my shepherd I haven't told you that and I'm not going to tell you that but I'm your shepherd but Lord can't you just show me how you are shepherding me no the

Lord is my shepherd I shall not want yes but Lord show me how will there be a deposit in my bank account I'm your shepherd now shut up and follow me but Lord how are you going to be my shepherd tell me how what are you going to do you don't worry about that that's my problem I'm your shepherd put your hand in the hand of Jesus every morning when you wake up and don't worry I'm your shepherd and stop asking questions he works as powerfully in the quietness of our everyday lives when there are no obvious signs of God and it shows us that while he has saved by miraculous signs and wonders the exodus the cross he works mightily through our normal everyday lives that's why Paul the apostle says as we know in Romans 8 in all things

God works for the good of those who love them who have been called according to his purposes all things God works for the good I've had arguments with God by the way about that one I've said to God no the things that have happened to me Lord that are not for my good forget it there's no ways that that particular event occurred in my life for my good forget it that's what the Bible says so here in the story expression to the theme of his great powerful salvation fulfilled on the cross quietly working and healing in the lives of broken people like you and I who come to him to shelter under the wings of Jesus Christ and the gospel the question is will you do it today let's bow and pray father many of us are looking for more many of us feel that you are indeed not really active in the world we look at the violence in the world we look at what's happening in the Ukraine in Israel we look at the terrible things that are happening in our country the lawlessness and Lord the devil tempts us to believe that you are not working because there are no obvious miraculous signs but Lord thank you for reminding us in this magnificent story that your chesed love shows itself every day through everyday events and the way we serve one another in the church thank you Lord that the story is actually the gospel it's not just a story that predicts the coming of Christ but it is about Christ it is the gospel help us therefore to embrace our Lord Jesus Christ realizing that he works as if not more powerfully in our lives every day without any great miracles compared to the great intercessions that we feel we need and we thank you for this we thank you that you have promised to be our shepherd even if you haven't promised to show us precisely how we thank you for all these things

Lord may we shelter ourselves this morning under the mighty wings of Jesus Christ and the cross for it is in his name that we pray Amen