

Ruth Chapter 1

A Faithful Foreigner

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God begins to restore the fortune of his faithless people through a faithful foreigner...

Introduction

Over the next three weeks we're going to be looking at the book of Ruth. So what's it all about? The scene is set for us by the book immediately preceding Ruth – Judges. It's a low point in Israel's history. They're in the promised land but spiritually speaking, miles from the God who brought them there. Under his judgment the nation is in decline – overrun by foreign armies and ruled by their kings. God is still merciful providing Judges and periods of stability under their leadership. But the overall trend is downward. And against that gloomy backdrop the story of Ruth stands out as a beacon of light.

On one level it's a love story – a poor destitute foreign woman is rescued by a wealthy landowner. It's the kind of rags to riches tale of Hollywood film, *Pretty Woman* where the helpless, hopeless and penniless prostitute is wined, dined and finally wed by the wealthy businessman. Ruth is certainly a great love story. On another level it's part of a nation's history... giving hope in a hopeless situation as God demonstrates that he has not given up on the whole nation and neither have they all given up on him. But above all it's part of God's rescue plan for humanity – a vital link in the chain without the whole world would have remained under God's judgment forever. It'll show us God's sovereign control over all things – from the chance encounters between individuals to the fate of nations and all humanity. And it'll show us how all those things are woven together to accomplish his great plan of salvation. So then let's get into the story...

Reading – Ruth 1

1. A Portrait of Disobedience (1-5)

The story seems to begin in a fairly normal 'once upon a time' kind of way. But a closer look reveals that every stroke is painting a portrait of disobedience. Let's look at it more closely...

'In the days when the Judges ruled...' That's shorthand for saying, during a period of godless anarchy. If you've read the book of Judges or remember our sermon series on it last year, you'll know what I mean. It narrates the downward spiral of a nation. The refrain of chapter 21:25 has often been repeated in it – glance over the page to it...

'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.'

We've seen a great contemporary example of this in post-Saddam Iraq.(*). With no ruler, anarchy reigns – so it was for much of the period of the Judges. *'Everyone did as they saw*

people. It was godless anarchy. So when we read, in the days when the Judges ruled, it's a portrait of disobedience we're meant to see.

Moral and spiritual anarchy always flow from rejecting God, even if those things are hidden behind middle-class respectability. There is no morality without God who determines right from wrong.

'There was famine in the land...' Again seems like a straight-forward statement. But in all probability this was no tragic accident. No, most likely this was the result of God's judgment. Back in Deuteronomy the Israelites were told that if they remained faithful to God there would be great blessing for them in the land. But if they turned from him the covenant curses would come into play – chief among them? Famine.

You can't sin with impunity. There's always a price to pay. Like Israel we never seem to remember that at the point of choosing to turn away from God and do it our way.

'A man from Bethlehem took his family to Moab...' Elimelech like so many others did as he saw fit. Experiencing God's judgment, repentance is what is required. But instead he and his family run to Moab to escape the famine. Moab – of all places to go - a nation hated by God. They'd enslaved Israel in their own land for 18 years during the reign of Eglon, King of Moab. It wasn't that the journey was illegal but it was hardly an act of faith in God and it led to two illegal marriages. Mahlon and Kilion, Elimelech's sons, both married Moabite - wives God expressly forbade.

Like so many others the Elimelech and his sons when facing difficulty, whether famine or the lack of suitable wives, sought their own solutions rather than seeking the LORD. Elimelech's name means 'God is my King' but you'd never guess that from his life. He's left Bethlehem, 'the house of bread,' to settle among God's enemies.

Frankly it comes as no surprise to find that by v.5 he and Mahlon (sickly) and Kilion (failing) have all died. They typify the faithless men of Israel who will not take responsibility for themselves, their families or their nations by leading them God's way. Husbands, Fathers, are we doing any better for our families? Do we lead them in seeking God and his ways? Or are we a part of the problem modelling our own fix-it solutions to the difficulties of life?

How often the people of God have been hindered by men refusing to adopt their God given responsibility at national, church and family levels. That's one reason why the London Men's Convention is such an important thing...

So the women are left in a perilous state – there is no-one to provide for them, no welfare state, and life becomes a battle for survival. Yet into the bleak picture of vv.1-5 streams the light of v.6 ... *'the Lord had come to the aid of his people...'* They maybe a useless nation, this may be a faithless family but God is still faithful to his promises...

So with favourable reports of food in Judah Naomi decides to head home. But there's no real hope for her daughters in law there. So Naomi says (v.8) *"Go back each of you to your mother's home..."* Perhaps they thought they might find a second husband in Israel so they say (10) *"we will go back with you."* But Naomi knew better. What Israelite would marry a Moabite whilst he was living in Israel?

The only other source of a husband would be if Naomi had more sons. But that would require a new husband, a reversal of the body clock, and at least a fourteen year wait for them to become men. Verse 12 *"Even if I thought there was hope for me – even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons – would you wait until they grew up?"* No, just as her only hope was to return to Israel, so their only hope was to return to Moab.

And in all of this Naomi's bitterness is clear. Verse 13 *"It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!"* She had so much when she left Bethlehem, but she is returning with nothing. Verse 20 *"Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara, because the LORD Almighty has made my life very bitter... the LORD has afflicted me and brought great misfortune upon me."*

No longer Naomi, meaning pleasant, but Mara for bitterness. We shouldn't read that as her losing her faith... It's clear from v.8 that she still believes in God, in a God who shows his kindness. But she has despaired of him ever showing that kindness to her again. If his hand is against her then what hope can there be? That's how it appears and it leads to bleak despair. Have you ever felt like Naomi? Felt bitter because of your circumstances, perhaps even bitter towards God? Perhaps a recent bereavement, perhaps losing your home, or your job, or both. Perhaps looking at children who are far from the LORD living successful but futile lives. Perhaps finding yourself without Christian friends at school. And you despair. Why has it happened? And why to me?

Is she right to focus her bitterness against God? Naomi knows that her life is in God's hands, that recent events aren't random chance. God is sovereign over all things. But it's possible to believe that – that my life is in his hands without seeing the purpose of individual circumstances - we can't see where the chain of events is leading. Naomi certainly couldn't.

Naomi was bitter about the hand she had been dealt by God. She couldn't see where it was all heading. But she would bit by bit see more as we'll see over the next couple of weeks. Perhaps you are bitter or angry with God. That's understandable and at least it's a sign that we think God is in control – why blame someone who's not in control. It's like shouting at the ticket collector when the train is late. But that bitterness is often because we cannot see where God ordained events, even painful ones, will take us... We don't see the whole picture, though with the passing of time we may see more of it.

Perhaps Naomi felt that things weren't her fault which made God's hand all the more unkind. Moab was Elimelech's idea. We may not be responsible for every circumstance of our lives but we are responsible for how we respond to them. And Naomi was bitter. She may not have lost her faith but it's certainly taken a battering and left her in despair.

A portrait of despair. Yet, all is not lost, all is not as bleak as it appears – it never is whilst God is in the picture. Just have a look down at v.22

‘So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning...’

That little word ‘returned’ is full of meaning. The same word is used in the Hebrew 12 times in the chapter and it’s the word the Bible often uses for repentance. All may look bleak and messy but Naomi is now heading in the right direction – away from God’s enemies back to his people, the people he has promised to bless. It’s the place in which she will be brought back to him. In times of bitterness the only hope is to turn back to God, back to his people, not away from them. If you’re bitter with God tonight you’ll find it can only be resolved by returning to him. Naomi may not see the blessing yet but we begin to – it’s harvest time and harvest means – FOOD!

A Portrait of Faith (14-18)

In many ways Ruth had been through the same as Naomi – she too faced famine, she too lost her husband. But now as Naomi bids her return to Moab she refuses. Verse 14 *‘Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.’* Why would she cling to Naomi?

The path to Moab would be the path to hope and a future humanly speaking. There she would have her family to provide for her and maybe the prospect of another husband. But unlike her dead father-in-law Ruth doesn’t appear to go for the human quick fix solution. So why did she cling to Naomi? Because she was clinging to Naomi’s God. Verse 16

“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. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me...”

These are extraordinary things to say to anyone – let alone your mother-in-law! Ruth was opting for permanent widowhood and potential isolation as a Moabite in Israel. It would be like being a member of the Ba’arth party in Baghdad at the moment. She was prepared to throw her lot in with this God and his people even seeing Naomi’s bitterness and the fate of the family.

It must have begun as a borrowed faith, after all she was a Moabitess, but this was the turning point. The borrowed faith became a personal faith. Many of us will know that transition point – a faith borrowed from a friend or family member becomes mine. Borrowed faith helps no-one, but it’s often where faith begins as we see something in someone else...

Humanly speaking Ruth’s decision looks like madness – but doesn’t it often look like that when we really put our trust in God? Do you see the difference between the two women – the

Which way do you look at the world this evening? Which way do you look at your own life? Are you a Ruth or a Naomi? Despairing of the past or trusting for the future? One will slowly cripple us, the other liberate. Ruth puts her trust in God, her life in his hands. And what makes this so extraordinary is this – she is a foreigner! And the reader is going to keep rubbing Israelite noses in the fact by referring to her repeatedly as ‘Ruth the Moabitess...’

God longed for his people to be faithful in covenant relationship with him – but time after time they failed, just like Elimelech and his sons. Time after time they faced God’s judgment but they never seemed to learn. And yet here is Ruth, a foreigner, putting her trust in God and pledging her faithfulness to him. Out of that faithfulness flows a faithfulness to her mother in law that is astonishing. And out of that faithfulness God will work to restore the fortunes of his own people.

Conclusion

Two women looking at the same God see two very different things. One sees a bleak picture of despair – a God whose hand it turned against her. There is no hope on the horizon. The other looks from the same vantage point but sees a God into whose hands she will entrust her life and her destiny. So which is seeing straight?

With the benefit of hindsight we know it’s Ruth – there is hope. She’s looking at a God of sovereign control who works for the good of his people. We’ll see how he’s doing that in this story over the next couple of weeks. There are many people here tonight and through our own sets of circumstances we may have many different views of God. Who is seeing straight tonight?

The one who sees the God who ‘in all things works for the good of those who love him to conform us to the likeness of Jesus.’ We’ve got so much more to go on than Ruth did. Well may each one of us see that God, the one who works for the good of his people, more clearly as we see his hidden hand at work in this story of Ruth.