

Introduction:

The book of Ruth is a powerful story of hope and redemption that follows two women, Naomi the Israelite and Ruth the Moabite, who face profound loss and uncertainty, and a man named Boaz, who provides for them with faith-filled generosity. Yet, this story is not just about these characters as behind their actions lies the providence of God crafting a narrative that points far beyond their lives alone. Notice how it ends in Ruth 4:18-22. This is perhaps one of the most important genealogies in Scripture, revealing King David was the great grandson of Boaz. Repeated in Matthew 1:1-6, this genealogy confirms Jesus is the Christ, the son of David and Abraham, making this story an integral part of God's plan of redemption. For our purposes, we will unpack how it not only serves to show how the Messianic line progressed but highlights important aspects of our redemption, urging our hearts to wait for our redeemer. Our passage today, in Ruth 1, can be divided into three scenes that set the stage. The first scene is in verses 1-5, where we see,

Tragedy Set Within Faithlessness

Verses 1-2 are loaded with significance. Look there with me, "In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there." This story opens by setting it in a significant period of Israel's history, "when the judges ruled." The book of Judges recounts this period as one of repeated covenant disobedience followed by God's judgement through foreign oppressors and deliverance through the judges. Judges 17:6 and 21:25 define this time, repeating, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The mention of a famine in the land increases the focus on Israel's faithlessness as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 reveal destroyed crops and famine were consequences for covenant disobedience. And note how the actions of a family are described before the characters. Actions that show an Israelite from an important tribe and place taking his family out of the promised land to sojourn in Moab. Moab was not an ideal place for a faithful Israelite to sojourn. In Numbers 25, the people of Israel were led into apostasy after having sexual relations with Moabite women. In Judges, Moab was one of Israel's oppressors with the king of Moab hiring a diviner named Balaam to curse Israel, seeking their destruction. And a law in Deuteronomy 23:3 specifically forbid Moabites from entering the religious assembly, becoming the foundation for Israel's separation from all nations in Nehemiah 13. The theme of faithlessness is compounded with the family's description in verse 2. Elimelech means "My God is king" and them being "Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah" is reminiscent of David's description as, "the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah" in 1 Samuel 17:12. These details, for an Israelite reader, make the decision to leave is even more suspect when we understand God promised to withdraw His anger and covenant curses when His people repent in Deuteronomy 30. So, instead of repenting and trusting in God's promise, Elimelech is seen seeking provision in a foreign country known for apostasy. Notice what happens next in verses 3-5, "But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband." Tragedy strikes. Elimelech dies in Moab, his sons take Moabite wives which was prohibited in Deuteronomy 7, and ten years later, they died as well. Now, note the emphasis on Naomi and her state. Elimelech is called "the husband of Naomi" and Naomi is described as being "left with her two sons" in verse 3, and "left without her two sons and her husband" in verse 5. While we aren't sure their deaths were God's judgment, the Hebrew for "left" is often used for those who survive God's wrath, and marriage to foreigners was a covenant curse in Deuteronomy 28, as well as barrenness, which is Orpah and Ruth's state after ten years without children.

The tragedy and hopelessness Naomi faced is set in the midst of Israel's sin and her husband's decision to seek provision away from the Lord, showing how "the sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply" (Ps. 16:4). Continue to the second scene, in verses 6-18, where we see,

Divine Care in Great Despair

As we move through this part of the story, notice how our attention is drawn to the Lord. Look at verses 6-7, "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah." Note three things. First, the repetition of the word "return," which is a key word in this chapter. Naomi returns "from the country of Moab," and "to the land of Judah." Second, Orpah and Ruth began with intentions to return with Naomi. Third, and most importantly, the reason for their return is that Naomi of the Lord visiting His people, a sign of removing His judgment and coming to their aid. And she heard this, "in the fields of Moab." As she was seeking the provision they went to Moab for, this news breaks into her despair to draw her to God's goodness. Notice how the tension builds in verses 8-10, "But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!' Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.'" Naomi tries to persuade Orpah and Ruth to return home to seek husbands, but they both refuse and say they will return with her to the people of Israel. Note, once again, the focus on the Lord. Naomi calls for Yahweh's "hesed" love toward them, which is an important covenant term for God's loyal, loving care used most often to speak of delivering His people from despair. As this kind of kindness is a main theme of this story, it is no accident it begins with the Lord here. Continue to the climax in verses 11-14, "But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.' Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her." Doubling down on her plea for them to return, Naomi draws out her inability to provide them with husbands, persuading Orpah to leave while Ruth remained. Why was this Naomi's concern? In the ancient Near Eastern world, a woman's primary means of provision and protection came through her husband and extended family. So, this is highlighting how little hope they have for the normal means of provision by remaining with her. Yet, note how the Lord becomes the focus again as Naomi speaks of God's role in her troubles. What was alluded to is now declared, Naomi's situation is the result of God's discipline. Yet, there's irony in this, as God is also the one who broke into her despair with news of His provision, and Naomi invokes Yahweh's kindness on her daughters-in-law while believing it is too late for her. What she doesn't know is that the Lord's hesed love is pursuing her. Look at the resolution in verses 15-18, "And she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.' And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more." When Naomi tries a third time to persuade Ruth to turn back, Ruth responds with one of the most beautiful expressions of loyalty and faith, composed in five pairs of lines. The first and last pairs command Naomi to stop trying to persuade her to leave and calls on God's judgment if she does. The second and fourth speak of commitment to Naomi in life or death. And the central pair takes Ruth's commitment beyond Naomi, choosing to be united with the people and God of Israel.

Ruth, a Moabite, communicates hesed love toward Naomi while entrusting herself fully to God and, by doing so, calls on Naomi's heart to do the same. And, though Ruth is the one communicating hesed love, the author's repeated focus on the Lord reveals it is His love flowing through Ruth. Family, true love flowing from people is always an extension God's love. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us." When we see love like this, we are meant to see the God of love at work. In the midst of Naomi's despair, divine care was pouring out on her. This brings us to our final scene, in verses 19-22, where we see.

Providential Love Pursues a Broken Heart

The conclusion of chapter one shows a grieving heart met with providential love. Look at verses 19-22, "So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?'" As Naomi and Ruth enter Bethlehem, they are met with great interest from the town who recognize Naomi. Naomi means "the pleasant one," but she returned as anything but pleasant. She tells them to call her Mara, which means "bitter," and, using the names of God that speak of His sovereign rule, Yahweh and El Shaddai, says this is because God has dealt bitterly with her through her affliction. Note why in verse 21, she believes she left the land of Judah full and returned empty. Consider the irony again. She has forgotten the state they left in. They left their home in the famine, which itself is ironic because Bethlehem means "house of bread or food." Her children's names, Mahlon and Chilion, may even mean "sickness" and "wasting" further emphasizing their desperation. And look at verse 22, "So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest." Naomi fails to acknowledge Ruth's profound kindness and love in remaining with her or see the Lord's grace in the timing of her return. As Daniel Block comments, "The timing is critical and providential, for it means that Naomi and Ruth arrive in 'the house of bread' just when the grain for bread is ready to be cut,... Since barley was the first crop to be harvested each year, the timing of their arrival meant that Naomi and Ruth could get settled at a time when food would be relatively plentiful and that they were around to lay up stores of each crop for the dry season." (Daniel I. Block, *The New American Commentary: Judges, Ruth*, p. 650). While Naomi's heart is blind to the providential love of God extending to her, God is relentlessly pursuing her with it. As this truth concludes our study this morning, I want to consider how chapter one speaks to us during the Advent season. First, it speaks to how,

1) God Stepped into Our Brokenness with Love

Do you remember our Advent Reading? Romans 5:6 and 8 says it was "while we were still weak" that "Christ died for the ungodly." And "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" to reveal God's love for us. Family, as God stepped into Naomi's desperation, He plunged Christ into ours. And not only that, but God meets us time and time again in our brokenness. Whether it is through direct intervention or the kindness of others, the Lord showers His people with kindness. The God who providentially loved Naomi meets all who trust in the saving work of Jesus Christ in their need. If you are broken today, know the Lord is here to wrap you up in the arms of His providential love. Yet, this story also speaks to how,

2) God's Love May Not Look as We Imagine

Naomi was right to see the Lord over her situation but failed to see God's actions as love. Last week, we mentioned how God disciplines ones He loves. What Naomi thought was God dealing bitterly was actually the Lord fiercely pursuing her in love. Family, hide the promise of Hebrews 12:11 in your heart, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." Your sorrow may be what is needed to yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness. This is why we often sing the old hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," with lines that say, "Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take the clouds you so much dread, are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head."

And “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense but trust Him for His grace. Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face... The bud may have a bitter taste but sweet will be the flower.” God’s providential love may, at times, have a bitter bud but the flower is always sweeter. Finally, this story speaks to how,

3) God’s Uses Us to Extend His Love to Others

While our focus is on the Lord’s actions, we cannot miss Ruth’s. A Moabite woman, with no apparent reason to extend such love to Naomi, will consistently be the hands and feet of God’s love in this story. Family, this is how God often extends His love to others. Turn to 1 John 4:7-12. John says, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” Let me see if I can flesh this out quickly. Love, we are told, comes from being born of God and knowing God, because God is love. A lack of love means we do not know God. Why? Because God’s love is shown through Jesus’s sacrificial death that redeemed us from sin and causes us to live through Him. We should love because no one has seen God, and our love, which comes from the God of love abiding in us, is his love perfected in us. Family, this means our love is God extending His hesed love to others through us. So, as we are pondering God’s love reaching into our brokenness, we should also ask how we are showing that love to others, like Ruth does.

Conclusion:

Now, as the worship team is coming to lead us in our hymns of response, I want to make sure we know where this kind of love comes from. Notice what John says, “whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.” This love isn’t something we manufacture. It flows through us as God abides in us and comes from knowing all He promises to be for us in Christ. Then, as we know Him deeply and walk more closely with Him, His love will flow from us to others. So, as you respond today, set your mind on the hesed love of God, letting it be the theme of your heart this Advent season. If you have not trusted in the finish work of Christ, see how God shows His love for you through Christ’s death, to redeem you and give you new life in Him. If you desire to grow in your love for others, go deeper in your life with Christ. Ponder anew what this Advent season reminds us of to transform your heart and actions. Would you pray with me as we respond to God’s astounding love today?