

Ruth:

October 12, 2008 Chapter 1 Hope Forsaken

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

This morning and the next few weeks we are going to study the Book of Ruth. It has to be one of the most beautiful books in the Bible. It is a tale of charm and delight. Alexander Schroder writes, *No poet in the world has written a more beautiful short story.*

The book of Ruth is a story about very ordinary people facing extreme hardship.

We meet Naomi who underwent much hardship in famine and bereavement, but who eventually won through to peace and security.

We meet Ruth, the foreign girl from Moab, who attached herself to Naomi, her mother-in-law, and to Naomi's God, and received His blessing.

We meet Boaz, Naomi's kinsman by marriage, who showed kindness to Ruth and to Naomi, and who by marrying Ruth fits into God's purpose for history.

Why was the book named after Ruth? Ruth was not even an Israelite. She was a Moabite which is pointed out several times in the book. This is the only book in the Old Testament canon named after a non-Israelite.

Ruth is not really the main character. Based on the plot, the book is more appropriately titled, The Book of Naomi or the Book of Boaz.

The story takes place during the time of the Judges before Israel had any kings. Before King Saul. Year was around 1400-1100 BC.

The book is also different from many others in Scripture because there are no didactic lessons or direct teaching. God never speaks verbally in the book, and yet His hand of control and providence is seen miraculously and wonderfully throughout. Even though you can't see God, His finger prints are all over.

That is why the book is part of the canon of Scripture. It teaches us to see God at work, even when it might seem, from our perspective, He is being silent.

Ron Mehl's book, God works the night shift.

The period of the judges were extremely hard times, because the people of Israel turned their backs on God. It has been and can be summarized with the statement from Judges 21:25. It is the very verse that precedes the beginning of Ruth. In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Suffering is part of the human experience. During those times it seems as if God is silent. He is nowhere to be found.

Why is it that two children died in a house fire as it was with the McKinnon situation a few weeks ago. Why do innocent people get killed to no fault of their own.

Why is it that some people are diagnosed with disease?

Why does God allow all this to happen? What is His purpose in all of this pain? Where is God in the detours and the left turns in life?

These are questions that we all struggle with. Because each of us have all walked through those dark shadows. Some more than others. The fact is we all have a story to tell. If we don't we will.

Let me give you two perspectives in dealing with pain.

The first one comes from William Shakespear in the Book of Macbeth by the character of McDuff:

*Every mourn
New widows howl
New orphans cry and
new sorrows strike
heaven on the face.*

Can you feel the power of that? What he is saying is that every tragedy, every innocent death, every pain, every bad diagnoses that comes back, every injustices, this is an assault on the character of God.

Every evil, every suffering strikes heaven on the face with clinch fist that says if there is a God and He allows evil to exist He does not care or He is not good.

This is probably the most prevacious thought on evil today. The popular logic of evil today is this: If evil and suffering exist and God doesn't do anything about it, He may be all powerful, but He is not good. Or if evil and suffering exist and God can't do anything about it, He may be good but He is not all powerful.

Let me offer to you another perspective from an English author which most of you have heard. C.S. Lewis from the Great Divorce. *Ah, the Saved...what happens to them is best described as the opposite of a mirage. What seemed, when they entered it, to be the vale of misery turns out when they look back, to have been a well, and where present experience saw only salt deserts, memory truthfully records that the pools were full of water.*

Over the top of the heads. Lewis has a way of doing it. But all Lewis is saying, God has this funny, funny way of taking something, and entering into it and working through it and working out His perfect will.

This is exactly what happens in the Book of Ruth. Despite the suffering, the pain, the tragedies, God works out his perfect plan.

Look at Book of Ruth.

1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. 2. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Moving house is not a task most people undertake lightly. It is costly and unsettling. It means pulling up roots, leaving friends and neighbors.

Why did they move. Apparently there was a famine in Bethlehem. Ironically the name Bethlehem means a House of Bread.

The famine apparently was not wide spread, because Elimelech decided that he and his family should go and live for a while in the land of Moab. Moab is 50 miles southeast of Bethlehem, centered on the high plateau east of the Dead Sea.

And of all places, why go to Moab! Who are the Moabites? They were decedents of Lot.

Moabites were hated by the Jews. They were worshippers of Chemosh, a god to whom human sacrifice was apparently made. Eglon, the king of Moab, had invaded the land of the Israelites and pressed the people of Israel into servitude for 18 years.

Psalm 108:9 God says, Moab is my wash basin. One way to paraphrase what God says about Moab might be to say, "Moab is my garbage can."

J. Vernon McGee said, Elimelech leaves the house of bread and the house of praise and they go over to eat out of a garbage can.

Ironically Elimelech means "My God is King." Apparently he did not live up to his name.

Matthew Henry asks how the move to Moab could possibly have been justified, He writes, *It is evidence of a discontented, distrustful, unstable spirit to be weary of the place in which God has set us, and to be leaving it immediately, whenever we meet with any uneasiness or inconvenience in it.*

Jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Grass is greener on the other side. Elimelech, along with his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion moved to Moab.

In verse 3 it says that Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died. Whoa! If you were reading the Book of Ruth for the first time you would think that Elimelech was going to be one of the main characters. It is like killing off Tom Cruise in the first scene of a movie.

In that time period a wife was dependent on her husband for survival. Fortunately for Naomi she has two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. The name of Mahlon means unhealthy and Chilion means puny. Even though these names don't speak well of the sons, Ruth is still fortunate to have two sons to take care of her.

Verse 4, They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, This is where Ruth is introduced. You have some interesting dynamics introduced. The house is inter-racial. The household is being introduced to different foods and most of all to different gods. According to the Mosaic Law it was prohibited for Elimelech's sons to marry Moabite women.

The text says they lived in Moab for 10 years. It's amazing how easy it is to become accustomed to the things of the world. 10 years living in a heathen land. You would think by then there would have been some grandchildren. There weren't any. Don't forget in a patriarchal culture a woman must give birth to sons. Sons are prized. I'm sure after ten years, Mahlon and Chilion were weighing their options. The ancient motto was, Family survival at all cost. The barren wife was first to pay.

Just as Naomi is becoming accustomed living without a husband, the unthinkable happens her two sons die. This is all too familiar. This time Naomi has to go through the whole grief process again but not just for one but for two. Her two sons have died. It's one thing to have your spouse die, but to lose two sons, unbearable. Naomi has

given her life to these two boys. Think how devastating that is? McKinnon family loss of home and children. I heard people saying, I don't know how I could deal with something like that.

Naomi is done. All hope is lost. All that there is left is three widows. She will be forgotten along with the men in her life. The men in her life have died, and so had their names.

In the Israel culture that is huge. Not only Naomi lost the three men of her household, but there is no heir by which their names will be continued and their inheritance guaranteed.

Besides the incredible emotional lost she experience deep economic lost. As a widow she has plummeted to the bottom of her society. Everything has been stripped from her. Her future, // her security, //her self worth //and value. Her future dependent on her husband or her sons and now that is all gone. An older widow like Naomi in that culture had it bad. There was not hope.

The author of this book is piling up one disaster on another in Naomi's life, giving the readers a real sense of shock that one person should be called on to suffer so much. Surely it was undeserved; surely unexpected.

Naomi had suffered - loss of a spouse, loss of two sons, financial collapse, and a major move, wounds inflicted by traumas of this magnitude do not easily heal and triggers great depression.

Here we see the dark side of God's providence - that some of our pains seem unbearable; some of our circumstances so unjust; some of our questions stay without answers?

The saddest part of Naomi is, with all her misfortunes she felt like she has lost her God as well. She feels curse and rejected by God. She cries out God has curse me and cheated me and treats me like an enemy. She has lost everything. Total lost. She has nothing left. Naomi is destitute and the only life she has is one of a beggar.

But to Naomi's credit, I believe she kept alive in her consciousness the reality of the Lord's help to her people in the past. She still had this ray of hope in God despite that fact that she feel God has dealt with her bitterly.

She decides to go back to her own country, probably to seek more comfort and support and she also heard that the famine was over.

Verse 7 With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

Have you ever been on a dirt road and you know you are going to have to walk several miles. In Wisconsin we were backpacking, ALost@ we finally stumble across this dirt road. There is a lot of time to think.

Naomi is walking down a dirt road along with her two daughters-in-law. Assuming they have walked several miles and all the events are going through Naomi's mind. She then stops and says, "This is crazy. This is nuts."

Verse 8, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. 9 May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Go back to your own country where you have hope. Go back where you might have a future. Because, if you come with me there is nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Verse 12 & 13, *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- 13 would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!"*

Look at the tremendous love that Orpah and Ruth had for Naomi. Verse 14 At this they wept, sob again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her. Then Ruth says these most beautiful words ever written commitment. 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. 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 anything but death separates you and me."*

Whow! Ruth is awesome. Look at what is going on here. Naomi has just painted her future black. She basically tells Ruth that she has nothing to offer her. There is no hope and only pain if Ruth decides to follow her.

Go back to your own country at least there is hope that you can get remarried and have children. But if you come with me there is nothing. Naomi paints her future black on the canvas of misery and sorrow. Despite all that Ruth still follows her and not only follows her but makes a commitment to follow her God.

This is a testimony of Naomi=s faith, even in adversity. Ruth saw something in Naomi=s faith that made her want to follow her God.

Ruth now is going to become a immigrant. Every immigrant that moves to a new country takes a tremendous act of courage. New language, new customs, new culture. Every immigrant moves to a new country to look for a better life. Hope for a better future.

Here Ruth becomes an immigrant not thinking that she is going to have a better life, knowing that her life will become worse. She is the only immigrant moving to another country expecting a worse life. All she has to look forward to is a life of rejection, assaults, and violence.

In some ways it=s going to be harder for Ruth than Naomi. Throughout the Book she is know as Ruth, the Moabitess. Ruth, the Mobitess. The narrator does not let you forget that.

Let me remind you again Moabites and the Jews were the worse of enemies. There was incredible racial animosity between the Moabites and the Jews and Ruth was a Moabite.

Not only is she moving in as a woman. Not only is she moving in as a widow but she is also moving in as a hated race. She is putting herself in extreme danger as we will see later on.

After a 50 mile journey Naomi finally reaches home. She quickly becomes the talk of the Bethlehem.

Verse 19 When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" Naomi's appearance is so altered that the sight of her throws the women of the village into a state of confusion.

Carolyn James writes, No makeup artist could conceal the dark circles, deep creases, and ashen coloring that etched defeat into her face.

Look at how she responds; Verse 20 "Don't call me Naomi, " she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 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."

Names are extremely important. The name Naomi meant, pleasant. Now she is telling the people to call her Mara because God has made my life very bitter.

Let me ask you a question. Have you ever felt like changing your name to Mara? Have you ever felt like God has made your life bitter?

IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS GOD GIVES US HOPE

God works the night shift. When you are sleeping, unaware, God is working behind the scenes.

That is what is amazing in this Book. There is no parting of the Red Sea. There is no fire coming down from heaven. There is no miraculous signs, but that doesn't mean that God is not working. Hindsight you see His finger prints and foot prints all over the place.

I want to go back to verse 21, and notice what Naomi says, I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. That is not completely true. It is true that her family died, but God brought Ruth back with her. This is a tremendous gift of grace. At this point she doesn't see the significance of it. She is blinded at this point. She is completely oblivious to God's blessings by bringing Ruth into her life.

When we enter into pain and suffering we become so wrapped up in ourselves we are oblivious to what God is doing. We become so self absorb and act as if we are the only ones in the human race that has ever gone through trials and tribulations When I was in Roswell, halfway through chemo, I found myself walking in the children's ward. Feeling sorry for myself, and lost in my own thoughts, the sight of a young child without hair was playing a game in the hallway. Sights like these help put life in the right perspective.

Naomi can't see God's greatest gift and blessing to her, Ruth. When our agenda does not match with God's agenda, we begin to think that God has abandoned us. Right under our nose can be our Ruth, the greatest avenue of blessing in our life. We're blinded to the incredible blessings that God has placed in our lives because we are all wrapped up in our self pity.

Phillip Yancey understands. *Pain narrows vision*, he writes. He continues by saying, *The most private of sensations, it forces us to think of ourselves and little else.*

All throughout Scripture you see God working behind the scenes. He works through orphans. He works through widows. God's greatest works come through hardship and suffering. God's most profound work which you think are salt deserts are God's greatest blessings.

Henri Nouwen: *We fail to see the place of suffering in the broader scheme of things. We fail to see that suffering is an inevitable dimension of life. Because we have lost perspective, we fail to see that unless one is willing to accept suffering properly, he or she is really refusing to continue in the quest for maturity.*

Folks, God doesn't enjoy to see us suffering, but He enters in the pain and has a miraculous way of using it to bring us closer to the throne of grace.

Henri Nouwen wrote a little book entitled: Can you drink the cup?
Can you drink from the cup that God has given you? This is what he says in the book:
We have to live our life, not someone else's. We have to hold our own cup. We have to dare to say >This is my life, the life that is given to me, and it is this life that I have to live, as well as I can. My life is unique. Nobody else will ever live it. I have my own history, my own family, my own body, my own character, my own friends, my own way of thinking, speaking, and acting - yes, I have my own life to live. No one else has the same challenge....Many people can help me to live my life, but after all is said and done, I have to make my own choices about how to live.

You have the choice on how you want to drink from that cup. You can drink from the cup with bitterness and resentment. Or you can drink from the cup knowing that God has His best interest out for you and he is doing a good work inside of you and will bring it to completion as Paul says in Philipians.

I had a high school math teacher that said as we are solving a math equation, Things always get messy before they get better.

Right now Naomi is at the bottom of her life. And next week we'll begin to see how God miraculously works in Naomi's life and Ruth's life.

The purpose of posting this sermon is for personal Bible study and resource material for pastors:

Resource materials:

Carolyn Custis James, The Gospel of Ruth, Zondervan, 2008

Daniel Block, The New American Commentary, B & H Publishing Group 1998

J.A. Motyer, The Message of Ruth, Inter-Varsity Press, 1983

Sermon - Mysterious Grace, Hidden Hope by Kevin Kim

