

Faithfulness at the Breaking Point | Ruth 1:1-18

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. Good morning, good morning. Good to see you. If you have a Bible, could you turn with me to the book of Ruth. So Joshua Judges Ruth. If you hit 1 Samuel, you've gone too far. It will be like one page spread probably in your Bibles. Unless you're like me, you've got big letters. Then it's about six pages. But the book of Ruth.

And as Chris said, we plan to be in the book of Ruth for about 10 weeks, interspersed actually with the book of Philippians. So that is something to just look forward to.

And as we go through the book of Ruth, like it is packed, packed, packed, packed full of just really just interesting stuff. That's kind of like the heart behind the kind of little the website that we've designed.

So you can follow along on a Sunday. You can get extra resources during the week. You can get devotional studies, whatever. Again, if you haven't got that, see Chris. And Chris will get you hooked up to that. And why the book of Ruth? Well, look, simply the book of Ruth is this. That every culture at some point has a breaking point.

And there's a lot of talk at the moment in the world about different cultures battling. Which culture is going to win?

[1:22] And you can talk about small cultures like a church culture like ours. Or you could talk about society or culture in a country or in a city or bigger cultures like the West.

But look, every culture has a breaking point. And the point is normally where commitment becomes too expensive. That's the breaking point. When commitment becomes too expensive. There's a point when loyalty becomes inconvenient.

A point where love begins to cost more than it gives back. When we reach that point, our culture has a simple answer.

Leave. Walk away. Find something better. Upgrade. I don't know about you, but I'm getting absolutely tired of all the upgrades.

Like I said, every morning, you need to upgrade this, you need to upgrade that. I'm like, I was totally fine before you told me I needed to upgrade. I didn't know how to use the downgraded version. But you need an upgrade.

[2:31] Or you can replace it or you can just move on. We live in an age of subscriptions, upgrades, temporary arrangements, disposable commitments.

We leave jobs. We leave neighborhoods. We leave marriages. We leave churches. We leave friendships. And often we leave because that relationship no longer serves us.

Now look, don't misunderstand me. Sometimes there are legit reasons to leave situations. The Bible gives us guidelines on those. But culturally, we have increasingly replaced covenant with convenience.

And the question underneath Ruth, specifically chapter one that we'll look at in part this morning, but Ruth as a book, is this.

What keeps someone faithful when faithfulness stops being beneficial? What keeps someone committed when commitment becomes costly?

[3:52] Or you could answer the question, ask the question like this coming on the screen. What kind of God creates people who stay? What kind of God creates people who stay?

That's what the book of Ruth is about. The book of Ruth is ultimately about when life becomes empty, God builds redemption through people who refuse to walk away.

So the context of this book is hard, isn't it?

Like the questions that it asks us right up front are designed to challenge us. This is not just a sweet story about a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law and this hero figure called Boaz who comes to

rescue them.

So turn with me to Ruth chapter one and you'll see immediately the opening context. We have some problems that are presented to us.

[5:09] The first problem there in verse one, in the days when the judges ruled. Problem number one. In the days when the judges ruled. Flick back one page in your Bibles and you will see the summary of what those days of the judges were like.

So there in Judges 21 verse 25, in those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

This is one of the darkest periods in Israel's history. It is spiritually chaotic. It is morally confused. It is politically unstable. Everyone was creating their own truth.

Everyone was becoming their own authority. Sound familiar? Judges is a story of societal collapse. And then Ruth is set right in the middle of that period of time.

So it's about a 400 year period. 400 year period. And Ruth comes right in the middle of that period. And so it was in those days when the judges ruled.

[6:24] Notice number, problem number two. We haven't got out of verse one yet. Problem number two is that there was a famine in the land. Famine in the Old Testament is never merely meteorological.

It's theological. It's theological. There was a lack of food. Yes, of course there was. But the inclusion of the fact that there was a famine is not just merely telling us that there was a lack of food.

The writer, the author is telling us the reason for the next events. The thing that was really moving the people of God and the enemies of God in that time.

It's telling us the spiritual condition of the people of God. Famine. And look, the first thing that we learn from this chapter, and again it's coming on the screen or you can follow along on the notes, is that when life feels empty, God is not absent.

When life feels empty, God is not absent. Because God does often, most often, his deepest work in seasons where you feel most abandoned.

[7:39] The dominant experience of Ruth, listen, the dominant experience of Ruth isn't temptation. It's loss. And that's key.

Because this chapter is soaked in emptiness. Just look at it again briefly. Verse 1. In the days when the judges ruled. So there's a loss of godly leadership. Again, verse 1.

There was famine in the land. There's loss of physical provision. Skip down to verse 6. You have three funerals. So. There's problems.

And so we read about this man of Bethlehem in Judea who went to sojourn in the country of Moab. Problem number three. If you know anything about biblical history, again, this isn't just, oh, there was a family who left Bethlehem and went to a foreign land.

[8:54] If you know your Bible, that will start to ring true. Because there was another family in the New Testament that left Bethlehem and went to another country. This time Egypt, not Moab. But here, this is more than just, oh, isn't this nice?

A family decided to move because of famine. Bethlehem means the house of bread. And yet there was no bread. It's irony.

So they leave. They go to Moab, which was a hostile territory. The Moabite kingdom. You know, sometimes people will go, oh, well, there's no real, you know, there's no real biblical evidence for Moab or for Syria or for any of these other countries in the Bible.

And you only have to do, you only have to do a short stroll through the British Museum or the Louvre or somewhere else like that, where that argument comes undone pretty quickly. If you know anything about Moab, Moab, the Moabites, were started by Lot's sons.

So you remember Lot? Most people remember his wife. So after Lot and his daughters fled from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, we're told in Genesis 19 that both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father.

[10:09] And the firstborn bore a son, called his name Moab. And he was the father of the Moabites to this day. And it seems from history that they did pretty well.

They did pretty well in expanding through the region as a family, as a tribe, and later as a kingdom. And we know that because there's lots of archaeological findings that mention Moab. I'll give you three really quickly.

They're coming on the screen. So this is the Al-Balustil from about 1300 BC. It mentions the territory of Moab.

And if you want to, you can go to the Jordan Museum, which I believe is in the capital. And you can go and see that. And so it talks about the territory of Moab.

The Egyptians are brilliant. They loved to talk about the kingdoms that they conquered. And so they just plastered it everywhere. And so that's great if you're a student of the Bible, because you can go, oh, tell me, I'll go and find something about Egypt, Egyptian.

[11 : 12] And sooner or later, you'll find someone gloating about their conquests. And so that's, it mentions the territory of Moab.

This is the statue of Ramesses II. If you've been to the British Museum, you can't help but not, you can't not miss that, right? And so that's from about 1250 BC.

Again, there's lots and lots of other statues in northern Egypt. This is one that is in the British Museum. That one, it is huge.

It's not like a little thing like that, right? That mentioned Moab as the nations that he conquered. And although what is certain is that Moab wasn't wiped out at that point, because the Moabite stone, the Mesha steel, which is this, which is in the Louvre, has a 34-line inscription detailing King Mesha's rebellion against the kingdom of Israel.

And King Balak is mentioned. And if you don't know who King Balak is, King Balak is from the story of Balaam. You probably don't know who Balaam is. But if I remember, if I talked to you about the talking donkey, then you'd be like, ah, that guy, right?

[12 : 21] So not Shrek, different talking donkey. So the point is, is that the country of Moab was undergoing the same kind of civil unrest as Israel at the time.

And during the period of the judges, Israel and Moab were enemies. In fact, in Judges chapter 3, you remember the Moabite king, Eglon, joined with the Ammonites and Amalekites to invade and oppress Israel.

And that oppression lasted for 18 years. And so this probably wasn't a safe move for the family of Judah, you know, to move from Judah to Moab.

And this wasn't simply a relocation. And this is, there wasn't security. And the truth is, actually, there isn't any security outside of God's promises, is there? And so this is what they are doing.

They are seeking security outside of God's promises. Like when life becomes difficult, sometimes we start looking for salvation elsewhere, don't we? When life becomes unsatisfied, we look for satisfaction and comfort elsewhere.

[13 : 36] When God isn't delivering on our timetable, we try to speed things up, don't we? We rarely stop believing in God, we just stop trusting God.

And that's what's happening here. But notice what happens there at the end of verse 1. We're doing spectacularly. A man from Bethlehem in Judea went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.

And then verse 2 tells us that the man, the name of the man was Elimelech. And the name of his wife was Naomi. And the names of his two sons were Malon and Shilion.

And they were Ephrathites. Now we're told who the Ephrathites were. They were people from Bethlehem in Judea. And they went into the country of Moab and they remained there.

But, verse 3, problem number 4. Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died. And she was left with her two sons.

[14 : 44] Now if that's not a big enough problem, look at verse 4. These had taken Moabite wives.

And the names of one was Orpah and the name of the other was Ruth. And they lived there for 10 years. And both Malon and Shilion died. Three funerals in five verses.

The family leave because of famine. And then Elimelech dies. Then Malon dies. And then Shilion dies.

And so the woman that was left was left without her two sons and her husband. And so we get this repeated idea of like the family, the family, what the family left.

Everything that Naomi leaned on disappears within 10 years. Not overnight, but within 10 years, she has moved from the house of bread to famine, to having a family, to being on her own.

[15 : 51] So the idea is in those five verses, it challenges us to feel that the loss of those verses and what's happening in those verses as a setup.

They're designed to help us ask a really, really important question. In those five verses, where is God? Have you asked that question before?

Like when you've gone through tough seasons of your life? Where is God? And that's Naomi's question.

Now look, here's the surprise. The surprise is that God is working most powerfully when he appears most absent. That's a testimony of the entire Bible.

That God works most powerfully when he appears to be most absent. And this becomes the entire theology of Ruth.

[16:58] In a moment, we'll see that Ruth is presented with the opportunity to return to her family in Moab. That's not the biggest challenge. The biggest challenge is to know that God is still writing the story when all she can see is loss.

That's her biggest challenge. It's our biggest challenge. Now secondly, would you notice in verse 6 that faith invites us to take a step.

So verse 6 says, When 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.

Where is God? Would you notice how quietly God enters the story? There's no miracle. There's no fire from heaven.

There's no angelic appearance. There is just bread. We pray every Sunday.

[18:09] Some of us pray every day that God would do a tangible, meaningful, visible work in our midst.

We pray for a revival. We pray for breakthrough. We pray for healing. We pray for God to move in power among us. And we should pray for those things.

We serve a God who still does miracles. But can I be really honest with you? While most of us want miracles, most often, God sends bread.

The miracle wasn't that bread appeared. The miracle was that God was present in the bread. He manifests Himself in the ordinary things of life.

In extraordinary ways. If you read your Bible carefully, you'll discover that, while God certainly does do miracles, He most often works through what appears to be baked goods.

[19:23] He manifests Himself in the ordinary things of life in extraordinary ways. Did fire fall from heaven? Did an angel appear? Did a prophet arrive with a word from the Lord?

No. We just get a simple statement. There was bread in Bethlehem. The famine had ended. The crops had grown. The harvest had come.

And Naomi understood that behind the ordinary provision of God stood an extraordinary God. And maybe that's a word for some of us today.

You're looking for God in the spectacular. It's really easy to get discouraged that way. Maybe you're looking for God in the spectacular while He's faithfully meeting you in the ordinary.

Maybe you're praying for a miracle while overlooking bread. Paul exhorts us in 2 Corinthians that we walk by faith and not by sight.

[20:34] The same God who parts, sees, is the God who grows wheat. And if we have eyes to see it, His presence is no less glorious in the bread than it is in the miracle.

And so Naomi decides to leave. She decides to return. And actually, that's one of the key ideas ideas in this book. It's the Hebrew word shav, to return.

Used 12 times just in this chapter. The entire story actually turns on returning. And that's the Christian life, isn't it?

The continual turning back towards God. Like, I think one of the challenges before us is the call to return to the Lord. Like, I wonder how many of us are physically here this morning but spiritually in Moab.

We've learned how to attend services on a Sunday. And we're good at it. But we lack obedience on Monday.

[21:59] We're able to sing songs without real surrender and we're able to speak of faith without growth. And the call of Ruth is the call of the gospel. Simply this, return to the Lord. And the future of our church will not be dependent upon strategies or having cool little web pages with sermon notes on or serving amazing coffee or having an amazing worship team.

All of that matters. Especially the coffee. It won't be determined on what conferences what we can put on or what events we can host.

It's simply going to be determined on whether we are willing to return wholeheartedly to the Lord. as a daily practice. So verse 7 says that she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law.

Verse 4 says that they were Moabites and they went on their way to return to the land of Judah.

Verse 8 says, 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 me and the Lord grant that you might find rest each of you in the house of her husband.

[23 : 27] And 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. 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 too, I am too old to have a husband.

If I should say, even if with 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.

[24 : 29] So Naomi tells Orpah and Ruth to return to their homes. Orpah does and there is no sense in the story that there is any shame attached to that.

Ruth, however, does not. Now look, think of Ruth's options. Following Naomi meant a hard life. No husband, no prospects, no security, no future, no guarantees.

It was going to be a world of unknowns for Ruth. The alternative was to stay in Moab with her family and culture. There, there was familiarity and opportunity and some level of predictability.

If you're putting that on a four against chart, you're probably only going to come out with one option, aren't you? And that's the one Orpah chooses.

The option that is safe, the option, sorry, one option is safe and one option is costly, one option is convenient and one option requires faith. And every disciple eventually reaches that crossroad.

[25 : 54] Jesus continually confronted people at those crossroads, didn't he? like the rich young ruler, the rich young ruler, the crowds in John chapter 6, the disciples at the cross, the disciples after the resurrection.

Everyone, it seems, loves the idea of following Jesus until faithfulness becomes expensive. and so then we see a third thing, that redemption happens through people who refuse to walk away.

Redemption happens through people who refuse to walk away. You know, often I think or we think if you jump on the internet and like certainly if you mix in some of the circles that I mix in that church growth happens because of gifted leaders or great preaching or strong worship or better programs. But if you understand Ruth, redemption enters history because of one ordinary woman who stayed. And one ordinary woman who walked with another ordinary woman. And in exactly the same way, God often builds his church through ordinary people who keep showing up week after week, conversation after conversation, prayer after prayer, meal after meal, acts of service after acts of service.

[27 : 47] And we talk about the future of the church a lot. But listen, the future of the church will not be built primarily by a few platformed people.

It will be built by hundreds of ordinary acts of faithful presence. Just like Ruth is doing here. And so Naomi replies in verse 15 to Ruth's pledge of allegiance, her faith.

And she says, see, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law. But Ruth says, do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you.

Do you notice what's happening? This is not sentimental affection. This is covenant language. A woman chooses to stay.

A woman chooses to walk with another woman. A woman chooses to go where she goes. And through this ordinary act of friendship, God is building a story. And if you don't know, if you're not aware, the story will eventually lead to King David being born and eventually Jesus.

[29 : 07] And what that means is this. It means that many of the most important things that God does in your life will not feel important in the moment.

Like, let's just be honest. There's a whole bunch of things that we do. I'll just put it into, I'll just say from my perspective and you can choose to agree. I don't want to speak into your heart at all. There's some things that I do. I do them. I chuckle at myself about how great they are and I'm waiting for the angel announcement. I'm like waiting for the big godly thumbs up coming out of heaven.

I'm like, Lord, don't you know this is important? And again, I'm reminded that actually most often the most important thing God does in your life will not feel important in the moment.

It looks like showing up. It looks like staying connected. It looks like having a conversation with someone you don't know maybe for the first time. It looks like encouraging someone. It looks like one word where you just said it and you just kind of thought I'm going to say it and maybe it will land and maybe it won't.

[30 : 21] That's faith. It looks like praying with someone. It looks like serving when nobody notices. It looks like getting up early and praying.

It looks like staying up late and praying. It looks like choosing community over convenience. And only years later will you realize that God was doing something extraordinary through what felt ordinary.

And look, that's why simple things like next week's lunch matters. Because on the surface it's just lunch and I've seen the menu, it looks great.

It's ordinary. It's bread and conversation. Nothing spectacular.

But then again, that's how God often works. You have no idea what conversation God might use.

And nobody, nobody in Ruth chapter 1 realizes they are standing inside the genealogy of Jesus.

[31 : 43] None of them. They are simply taking the next faithful step. God. The kingdom of God is built through ordinary acts of faithful presence.

It advances through people who refuse to walk away. And look, that is true in marriage, in parenting, in ministry, in friendship, in discipleship, in church leadership, in every sphere of your life. God. And look, as we close, there is a five-fold commitment that Ruth makes in verse 16 and 17.

Look at what she says. For where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.

and where you die, there I will be buried. This is not a contract. This is not a singular commitment.

[33 : 01] This is covenant. Covenant language. And this is why it feels so stunning, is that the author wants us to feel that kind of magnitude.

Like, Ruth gains nothing from this. does she? She's not sticking around going, I'm going to stick around because I might be Jesus' great-great-great- great-great- great-great- great-great-grandmother.

That's not on her agenda. She doesn't even know about King David. She has nothing to gain from this. At least visibly.

this is pure, self-giving love. And that's why it points beyond itself. Because every truly redemptive act in the Bible is ultimately a shadow of Jesus.

Like, Ruth left her home to identify with Naomi. Jesus left heaven to identify with sinners. Ruth entered poverty. Jesus entered humanity.

[34 : 11] Ruth embraced uncertainty. Jesus embraced the cross. Ruth bound herself to someone in need. Jesus bound himself to people dead in sin. Ruth says, wherever you go, I will go.

And Jesus says, I'm going to the one place that you cannot go. You see, the gospel is not ultimately that we are faithful. The gospel is that Jesus remained faithful when we were not.

And the truth is that everyone one of us is actually more like Orpah than Ruth. We like to put ourselves in the story, don't we? And we are always the heroes.

Like, no, I'm going to be Ruth. No, let's be honest. We're more like Orpah. Given enough pressure, we leave. Given enough suffering, we retreat. Given enough fear, we protect ourselves.

Yet Jesus never walked away. He never abandoned us. He never left. He never quit. And so because that is true, the gospel now creates a new kind of people.

[35 : 20] What kind of God creates a people who stay? That was the question I asked at the beginning. What kind of God creates a people who stay? Well, because Jesus stayed, he's created a new kind of people.

People who stay when it would be easier to leave. People who forgive. People who serve. People who endure. People who remain faithful, not because they're strong, not because they're wise or clever, but because they've experienced covenant love themselves.

The book of Ruth begins in famine. It begins in death and it begins in loss. And it begins in uncertainty. And one astonishing declaration, where you go, I will go.

And at first it sounds like Ruth's commitment to Naomi, but ultimately this is Christ's commitment to us.

Because before Ruth ever said it to Naomi, me, God had already said it to his people. And before we ever committed ourselves to Christ, Christ had committed himself to us.

[36:45] And the cross is God's eternal declaration. Where you go, I will go. Into suffering, into shame, into death, into the grave, so that one day we might follow him into resurrection life.

Let's pray together. Father, thank you for your word. Lord, truly a challenge to us.

Lord, we thank you, Lord, that your word speaks today. Thank you that your Holy Spirit speaks today. Lord, we want to respond to what he is doing with us and in us.

Lord, and we don't want to say glibly or loosely that we are coming back to you, Lord, but in our hearts, Lord, that is our desire. Lord, if we've strayed or wandered, or Lord, maybe we haven't been as passionate maybe as we once were, or maybe we've never been that passionate, Lord, help us today to stand on you and say, Lord, we are wholeheartedly going with you.

Where else would we go? You, Lord, have the words of eternal life. And so, Lord, as we come before you in song, Lord, we're going to make a declaration to come to the altar.

[38:25] And Lord, we know the altar is a place of death. It's a place of sacrifice, Lord, and maybe there's some this morning, Lord, that needs to get back on that altar.

Not because our getting on the altar saves us. You have saved us by getting on the altar, the altar of the cross. But your word challenges us each and every day.

To present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to you, which is worship. Maybe there's some things that need slaying in our lives.

Maybe some things that you've been dealing with us over the last weeks and months. Maybe those things are only just coming to light. Lord, you asked us to take a step of faith this morning.

And so we pray, help us to do that. Not in our strength, but in the strength that you provide. Help us again to say that we walk by faith and not by sight, and that we trust you. And even though that we don't know what tomorrow holds, and this week holds, and next month, Lord, we are going with you because we trust you.

[39:46] Help us declare that this morning we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.