

When Suffering Shapes Your Faith

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[0:00] Good morning, it's good to see you. Thanks for coming. Just want to reiterate everything! that Andy said about Paul. Paul you will be missed. My garden is going to miss you. That! is absolutely for sure. We could spend hours just talking about the stories of two highlights for me, getting the digger stuck. Normally diggers pull things out, right? So we managed to do that, trying to fix my garden and our trip to Jordan, which some of us will remember for a very very long time that you were part of. So just thanks for being part of our fellowship.

Thanks for bringing life to our fellowship. I know this isn't goodbye forever, you're only in Wimbledon. And so we expect to see you every Sunday in some clapped out, beaten up car or van that you tend to drive. So God bless you as you go from here. And yeah, let's not this, let this not be the last time we ever see you. So this morning we're in Ruth chapter 1. I'm going to pray real quick and we're going to get straight into our study, if that's okay. So Father, just thank you for your word. Lord, we want to submit to whatever your word says. Lord, we pray this morning, Lord, that the challenges of understanding the deep mysteries of God won't stop us from surrendering to you. Lord, we are aware, Lord, that our hearts can be so prideful, so full of self. Lord, and we just want to take this moment, Lord, just to settle our hearts before you and say, God, whatever you have for us is okay. It's okay with us. It may be difficult, but we may not understand it. Lord, but we want to say just as Ruth said, wherever you go, we will go. Lord, so help us with that, we pray. Fill us with your spirit. Lord, may my words be your words. In Jesus' name. Amen. So I want to start by asking a question this morning. And the question is this, it's coming on the screen.

The question is this, what story are you telling about God? What story are you telling about God? I don't mean the story that you're telling others, like in evangelism or in your office, what story are you telling about God? I'm talking about the story that you are believing about God and you're predominantly telling yourself about God. So what story are you telling about God? That is a super easy question to answer when life is going well.

So when things are, your ducks are lining up and things seem to be going well, that is a super easy answer to give. But it's a little bit more challenging when life isn't going so well, when circumstances change, like when your health deteriorates or expectations aren't met.

What do you believe? What is the story that you're telling about God in those moments? As we open the book of Ruth, I want to remind you of the story, how the story opens and it opens and I want to remind you that the story opens in moments like those. The story doesn't open in in good times. If you remember from last week, a famine drives a liminex family from being with God's people in Bethlehem, the house of bread, to living with God's enemies in Moab. And this didn't bring the relief that they expected. Like it wasn't a good move. It not only brought loss, but it brought complications and questions. And you remember like in the first five verses, there were famine and three funerals. That's how the book of Romans, excuse me, the book of Ruth opens. Romans was yesterday, right?

[4:25] Um, and so, um, we find, uh, Naomi stripped of her husband and her two sons. She's left with her two daughters-in-law and, um, it leaves Naomi empty and leaves Naomi bitter. And so she gives to her two daughters-in-law the opportunity to, um, stay or go back to their own family in Moab. And you remember one of them all says, yeah, I'll do that. I'm going to go back to my family and I'm going to leave Naomi. Um, but Ruth says, no. And we, we was reminded of that, um, famous kind of verse there where Ruth says, Naomi, wherever you go, I'm going to go. And this is where we pick up the story at the end of chapter one. We have two women. Um, we have two women without any worldly prospects, without any guarantee of safety and any guarantee, uh, of security. And they're traveling from a hostile area in Moab and they're traveling back to, uh, Bethlehem. And so that's where we pick it up.

Have a look in verse 19. It says, so the two of them, Ruth and Naomi, the two of them went on. So they were traveling until they came to Bethlehem. So together they arrive in a town again called the house of bread, Bethlehem. And as, and, and as they do, um, we're told in verse 22 that it is the beginning of the barley harvest. If you just flip down to the end of the, end of the chapter, verse two, uh, verse 22, the end of the barley harvest. Um, so this is quite a contrast from the beginning of chapter one. And we need to see this kind of flip in the story.

So at the beginning of chapter one, there's famine. And at the end there is harvest. Notice the other contrast is that they not only come back to harvest, but two of them are walking together, right? Um, the two, the two realities that mark chapter one, uh, the beginning of chapter one were famine and funeral. You notice that what happens at the end of chapter one, where we have, we have harvest and homecoming. That's the flip. The beginning of chapter one is emptiness in the land and loss in the home. But now at the close of the chapter, things begin to change. Now look, before we dive into this, um, into the text proper, it's worth telling you that, um, the book of Ruth is, um, is one of the five, um, Megillot or the festival scrolls. So in Judaism, there are five festival scrolls and they're in your, um, not the whole text, but the references are in your read along notes this morning. Um, and the book, so the book of Ruth is read even to this day, um, at, uh, one of the primary Jewish feasts. It's read every year in what we, what they call, um, the Hebrew festival is Shabbat, which we know in English as the feast of weeks. Um, now this is pretty cool because, um, there has some overlaps in terms of symbolism to what we understand in terms of the new covenant, in terms of Christianity and the church. Uh, and so like, um, Israel to this day, there's a 49 day, uh, period where, um, symbolically we have the barley offering all the way to the wheat offering. So the barley is at the beginning, wheat is at the end. And, um, the period of those two offerings or the period in between of those two offerings is known as the feast of weeks. So 49 days. Um, and at the end of those, that 49 days, there is a day called Shabbat, um, actually in, um, Israel it's one day. If you live outside of Israel, it's two days. Who knows why, right? Um, but thanks anyway, right? Um, so it not only celebrates the, the end of harvest, but look, symbolically this book is really, really important because you get to see, and we'll see this as we go through, you get Naomi who is Jewish, you get Ruth who is Gentile and you get them reunited or united by the Kingsman redeemer Boaz. And at the end of the 49 days, what do you get? You get the day of Pentecost, which is the 50th day, which we know from Acts chapter two is the birth of the church. Right. Um, I'll let you dig into that in the reading of notes. Okay. So, um, you get this, this book that is read by the Jews every single year, but it holds symbolism by saying, this is actually a picture, a future picture of what Jesus is going to do, uniting Jew and Gentile under Christ. And then they celebrate it at the end with the day of Pentecost, but they don't know why. Isn't that great? So, um, they have this, this feast. It also, look, it also commemorates the, um, the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. Um, every Jewish family decorates their home with green shrubs. And before you think that's crazy, think of Christmas. Um, it's not that crazy. All right. So they decorate their home with green shrubs and they stay up all night.

They read the law and, uh, they eat only dairy food. Right. So for some of you, that would be an absolute nightmare. Right. Uh, some of you would just go hungry. Um, and, uh, they read that then they read the book of Ruth and look, they read this little story for two reasons. Firstly, because in verse 22, it says that this was happening at the beginning of the barley harvest. Right. And so, um, the rest of the book happens between, uh, the barley harvest and the wheat harvest 49 days or 49 day period. Um, so it fits perfectly within that, but, um, they also read it because of the giving the law of God at Sinai. Um, and that scene, and we should see it if you're ever reading Exodus and, you know, the law of the Pentateuch, you should always read the law as, as God's kindness to his people.

[11:11] Like sometimes we read God's law and we're like, oh, God is angry. Um, we need to submit. If we don't submit, we're going to get smoked. Right. But fundamentally the giving of the law is God's kindness towards his people. And that's how the Jews really see the giving of the law. Um, it's not just about rules. It's about relationship. It's where God formally, they're at Mount Sinai.

It's where God formally establishes a relationship with the Hebrew people as God's own chosen people, even after the Exodus. And so God gives them the law, um, so that they would flourish, so that they would do really well as a people. Uh, Lord, the laws were meant to establish a stable, just, and compassionate society. Because as you read them, like from cover to cover, that it's filled with justice. It's filled with family life. It's filled with worship. It's filled with honesty.

It's filled with care for the vulnerable. And so God is giving a people a way to live and to live justly, um, and to live in right relationship with God. And so they read the book of Ruth.

And as they do so, they're reminded that Ruth is a picture of God, who is always loyal, who is always kind, and he has chosen a people to commit himself to and love. And so they read this book to remind themselves of God's love to them. And that's, you know, ideally, that's how we should read this book.

This is, this book's not fundamentally about us. This is about God. And so look, what begins, um, the chapter with famine and funeral now ends in harvest and homecoming. And as we move through these verses, there's three things I want us to kind of take home, three things I want us to see. The first is that trials, I'm going to read the trials of Naomi. The trials expose whether we believe God is useful or whether we believe God is good. Do you get that? So what do we believe about God? What was the story we're telling about God to ourselves? Do we believe God is useful or do we believe God is good? And trials and challenge and hardship kind of expose that question. [13:41] And so, uh, look at, uh, verse 19 again, they came to Bethlehem and it says that the whole town, um, was stirred because of that. They, they, they, it's been 10 years since they left.

And, um, like, that's not going to happen, uh, with you just to let you know, right? You're not going to leave Southampton and 10 years later come back and the whole town is like, Oh, they're back. But in, in Bethlehem, that's what was happening. And it even says that the women there in the end of verse 19 said, is this Naomi? So they weren't sure. So she had had such a challenge in 10 years that it clearly shown. Some of you are liking men. I've aged in the last 24 hours, let alone 10 years. And they're like, is that Naomi? It kind of looks like Naomi, but I'm not too sure it is Naomi. That's what the women were saying, right? And so, um, Naomi heard this in verse 20 and said to them, don't call me Naomi. All right. Call me, 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. Do you know Naomi's language? Um, she arrives in Bethlehem. The women kind of recognize her and she says, don't call me Naomi. Why? Well, it's simply because the name Naomi means pleasant. Don't call me pleasant. Don't call me delightful. Instead, call me Mara, which means bitter. And you can hear it. You can hear it in her voice, can't you? And she, then she gives the reason for it. She says, for the almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. Like this is just, this is, this is more than a name change. We see so many name changes in the old Testament and in fact, the new as well, don't we? Um, this is just another, this is just another change, name change, but this is a name change that's not been given to her by God. This is a name change that she's adopted herself. That's the difference. This is an identity statement. She is saying, look, my suffering in Moab has rewritten my story. I'm not coming back the same person. The challenges and hardships of my life in the last 10 years have created a different person. I'm coming back as that person. Um, my pain has now become my identity and my loss now defines me. And what's, what is fascinating is that Naomi, and this is really key for us as Christians, is that Naomi doesn't stop believing in God, does she? Like she's actually deeply theological. Notice she repeatedly refers to God. Verse 20, the almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

That's a theological statement. Verse 21, the Lord has brought me back empty. Another theological statement. The end of verse 21, uh, the almighty has brought calamity upon me. They're, they're all deeply theological statements about God. So her problem isn't that she doesn't believe God, right? She's not, she's not needing like, um, um, the, the apostolic, yeah, apostolic creed to be read to her, right? She believes God. It's what she believes about God. And the story that is, she is telling herself about God, which is actually the problem. Like she knows God is sovereign. She refers to him as the almighty.

[17:32] Her problem is simply that she cannot at the moment within this story at this moment, she cannot see God's goodness. And so in a way, what, what Naomi has, has, has been through over the last 10 years has really exposed, um, though that question and that, that two, I guess, important, two important questions. Number one, is God useful and is God good? And what do we, what is the story that we're telling ourselves about God? Is God useful and is he good? And sometimes I wonder how often we follow God because God is just useful. By that, I mean that, um, if you, if you, if your faith is rooted in the idea that God is valuable, what you're essentially is saying is I'm following God because he improves my life, he's useful to me. In some way, God, um, helps me. He helps my life. He helps my achieve my, my goals. Even he, he helps me feel good about

myself. Uh, he helps me feel connected to the people I need to connect it to. Uh, he's useful to me. And if you, if you're following

God because of that, then the danger is that when suffering comes and hardship comes and challenging times come, uh, those times don't make any sense because all of a sudden God has stopped being useful because your life doesn't experience that. And God's usefulness is measured then by his willingness to remove hardship and remove challenge and remove struggle. And when he does not, because sometimes, spoiler alert, sometimes he doesn't, faith begins to collapse and we start asking really, really deep soul-sourcing questions. And our faith begins to collapse because the foundation was never deeper than the outcomes. But if God is understood as good, not merely useful, and don't get me wrong, God is useful. Amen? Like God improves our life. Good. I'll just make sure we're on the same page, right? Um, but look, but look, he's not fundamentally useful. He's fundamentally good. He's first good. Um, and if we understand that first of all, God is good, then actually when hardship comes, it does something different to us. It doesn't, um, resolve into easy fixes or spiritual shortcuts, right? It doesn't become something that you can, you can just patch over like a plaster and just cover it up. It resists the fridge magnet Christianity that we're all so familiar with. Those simple slogans that sound comforting, but collapse under the real weight of challenge. In, in the, in that shallow framework where God is just useful, faith is reduced to something that is decorative, like an Instagram post, right? Or we used to call it back in the day, we don't see them too much anymore, more like a Jesus t-shirt, right? Um, ideas that sit on the surface of life but never really enter the depths. But when suffering comes, those things often feel like, like, like, um, like comfort and more like friction, right? Because they don't match the weight of what is actually being experienced. So when God is understood as good, hardship is not denied, softened away or spiritually edited, right? Uh, it's not made smaller than it is. It still hurts and it still confuses. It still takes time and tears and often silence to walk through. But the difference is, it is not that silence disappears or soon suffering disappears. Um, it just becomes useful.

Under the, if you believe God is fundamentally useful, then suffering becomes not useful. But if you believe that God is good, then suffering becomes useful. Does that make sense?

Yeah. I took a long time to get to that. I apologise. So, so when Naomi's life in Moab had been stripped away, and she comes back pretty much empty handed apart from Ruth. She now declares, not that God doesn't exist. But God does exist. The Almighty exists.

But God has ceased to become useful. She can't see that God is good. She doesn't accept that God is good in this moment.

[23:01] What she's struggling to hold on to is not God's existence, but God's goodness. It is the experience of someone who still believes God is powerful enough to govern a life, but is not, no longer sure he is good enough to be trusted with it.

And that tension is exactly what suffering exposes. Not whether we believe in God at all, but what kind of God we believe him to be when life no longer cooperates.

So what kind of story are we telling ourselves about God? This is what these verses challenge us about. Secondly, look at the statements in verse 21 and notice that bitterness grows when we finish the story before God does.

Ever done that? Finish the story before God has finished the story? So she says in verse 21, I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty.

Now look, that is not just a sentence. Like you can, you can hear the weight of it, can't you? That's not just casual language. This is a story that Naomi has started preaching over her own life.

[24:16] It is the conclusion about her life that she is drawn in the middle of pain. And notice that what she does there, she says, she doesn't merely say, I came back empty.

She's attributing meaning to it. She reads God's plan into it. Here is where the text sometimes I think becomes a little bit more painfully familiar because it's easy to build a complete narrative around a single painful chapter of your life, isn't it?

Sometimes it's something that's happened to us in the past or sometimes maybe there's an anxiety about the future. Maybe it's something you've lost and now that loss has become your identity or someone hurt you and now in that moment or because of that moment that's become your definition.

Maybe a prayer has gone unanswered that you've been praying for for years and now silence is becoming a theology. I'm reminded of one of the reasons I think it's there of the Psalms and the experience of the Psalms.

You know, the Psalms is filled with theology, isn't it? But it's filled with theology in the moment. Look at Psalm 13. It's going to come on the screen for you. Well, this is King David.

[25:37] So this is a descendant of Ruth, right? And King David says, how long, O Lord? And four times he asked that question. Lord, how long? You ever ask the question? Maybe you haven't used that language.

Maybe in your heart you're like, I'm done already waiting. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

So God is present because he's there, but God is hiding his face. God is present in King David's doctrine, and his theology, but absent in experience.

How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul? Which is, look, in other words, I am left alone with my thoughts and my thoughts aren't helping me.

When God feels silent, the mind does not become neutral, does it? It becomes crowded. Like you start reasoning, and you start replying, and you start interpreting, you start filling the gaps.

[26:47] And at this point, silence is no longer just an experience. Actually, for King David, it's become his theology. None of us are turning around, none of us are going, oh yeah, but King David said that God forgets us.

No, no, no, that's not theology, that's just theology in the moment. His experience of God, the story he's telling himself about God. And slowly, if we're not careful, without even realising it, you stop reading your whole life as a story.

And you start reading it as a sentence. And that is your life, that sentence, that moment in your life. That is the conclusion, that is the final, that is the closure.

The scripture keeps interrupting that assumption, and that's the good news. God is still writing that story. There are verses after verse 3 of Psalm 13.

Right? It doesn't stop there. And we still have another three chapters of Ruth to get through. Right? There's still a story. And so Naomi, what Naomi is doing, she's come back from Moab, and she's used her 10 years in Moab, and she said, that's my entire story.

[28:06] That is in my entire life. There is a conclusion here. Don't call me delightful. Don't call me pleasant. Call me bitter. Moving on. The good news is that, God is still writing that story.

And, you may not see the next chapter yet, and you may not understand, the turn of the page. But the presence of God in the narrative, is not measured by Naomi's current interpretation of it.

That's really good news. That's really good news for you guys, who are struggling this morning, with understanding what is next. Right? Your lack of understanding, doesn't dictate God, on what he is doing next.

Right? She says, empty, closed, complete. And so look at the final thing in verse 22.

That God often begins his greatest work when we feel most empty. Isn't it true that sometimes God has to empty and empty of us first before he can fill us?

[29:25] Like he has to get rid of the junk before he can give us the goodness. Wasn't it Nehemiah and his men who rebuilt the walls, they had to get rid of the rubbish first? Amen. Amen. Sometimes that takes a while, doesn't it?

And it's not a pretty or painless process. Verse 22, Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her.

who returned from the country of Moab, and they came to Bethlehem. Would you notice, they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

The chapter ends pretty quietly, doesn't it? But let's not move on before we've noted that they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of harvest.

And that sounds insignificant. It sounds just like it's a placeholder. It sounds like it's, oh, this is the beginning of the barley harvest, so therefore, this is the 49 weeks, we're going to come up to, or excuse me, 49 days, we're going to come up to the wheat harvest, all is well.

[30:35] Naomi knows none of that. She just returns empty, and there's this little inclusion in the text, oh, by the way, once you let you know, it's harvest.

Can I suggest that this is one of the most important verses in the book? Because while Naomi is talking about emptiness, listen very carefully, while Naomi is talking about emptiness, God is already preparing abundance.

Have you got that? While Naomi is talking about endings, God is already arranging beginnings. While Naomi is talking about loss, God is already working redemption. The harvest has begun. The answer has already arrived. She just can't see it yet. Now, of course, this story ultimately points beyond Naomi, doesn't it? Because there's another person in the Bible who knew grief, who knew loss, who cried out in anguish, and felt abandoned.

[31 : 59] Now, many of you would have been to Sunday school, and so the answer to that question as, who was that person, is? Good, well done. You passed. But look, there is a critical difference. Naomi believed God had abandoned her, and he hadn't. Jesus actually experienced abandonment, right? On the cross, what did he cry in Matthew? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Not theology in the moment, right? Actual theology. In that moment, God the Father, had abandoned Jesus Christ. The bitterness Naomi feared, became reality, for Jesus, to endure, right? So the judgment that she imagined, had fallen on her, abandonment, was actually placed on Christ. And that's great news for you, if you're a believer this morning. Because it means that, you're, if you think, that God has abandoned you, can I just respectfully say to you, you're wrong.

[33 : 19] And that's the good news. Right? Jesus took on that abandonment. Why? So that you would never be abandoned. And your feeling of abandonment, your experience of abandonment, is theology in the moment.

It's not actually true. Right? And so, every believer, because of Jesus, can know, that suffering, hardship, challenge today, listen very carefully, is never a punishment, for sin. Christ has already borne that punishment, for the Christian. Trials are not evidence, that God has stopped loving you. Trials are not evidence, that God has not finished, shaping you. God's purpose in suffering, is never destructive, ever, for the Christian. It's transformative. What does Romans 8 say?

Doesn't he say, that God works, all things. Like, there is a difference. to how we experience, hardship and challenge, and suffering, and trials.

[34 : 44] Like, none of that is good. Amen? Like, none of us are getting in line, and going, give me some trials this minute. I'll take an extra measure, please. None of us are doing that.

Right? Like, things, things aren't good. We just know, that there are things, that are broken. We know, there are things, that aren't good, in this world. But God, is so sovereign, that he can redeem, even what he doesn't approve of. And that is exactly, what's happening in Ruth.

And so the chapter, ends in harvest. Not because the story is finished, but because the story, is just beginning. And Naomi thinks, that she has arrived empty, but God has already, begun filling her future.

And perhaps, that's where, some of us are, this morning. You feel empty. Maybe you feel forgotten. Maybe you feel disappointed.

[35 : 43] Maybe things just haven't worked out, as you expect them to work out. Maybe you, you feel like your story, has become bitter. Maybe you've become bitter. But the, the good news is, that the God of Ruth, is still the God of redemption.

And the harvest, may not be visible yet, and the answers, may not have arrived yet, and restoration, may not even have come yet. But if Christ is risen, then no chapter, of your story, is the final chapter.

That's what the resurrection, of Christ teaches us. The God who turned, Naomi's mourning, into joy, the God who turned, Ruth's poverty, into redemption, the God who turned, the cross into an empty tomb, is still at work today.

So don't let your, trial make you bitter. Let it, let it drive you, deeper into the hands, of the Redeemer, and believe again, the truth about God.

That God is not just useful, but he is not, and he is not just good, he is very good. Let's pray again. Father, thank you, that you are good, you are a good God.

[37 : 01] Lord, we pray that you would help us, to tell that story, to ourselves. We would hear the Spirit, speak it over us today. Lord, that you are a good God.

And, when trials, and challenge, and suffering, and hardships come, Lord, may we believe again, that, these things aren't, useless, they're useful.

And in your hands, you redeem those things, that trouble us. You redeem those things, that challenge us. They're not there, just to make us bitter, they're there, to make us better. And so, help us to surrender, to you again, Lord. Lord, we pray again, Lord, that we wouldn't, be so challenged, by the mysteries, of how you work, that we fail then, to surrender, to that working. Lord, we want to, humble our hearts, before you, and say, God, whatever you are doing, even in the emptiness, even in the challenge, and hardship, Lord, we trust you. And we trust you, because you're good.

[38:14] Lord, we don't want to go, to pat answers, and we don't want to go, to fridge magnet Christianity, and we don't want to, have classes, just cover up the reality. Lord, we want to walk with you, we want to struggle with you, in those, and hold the tension of that, in our life, Lord.

But ultimately, we trust you, why? Because you're good. Amen. And so, Lord, would you give us, that faith this morning, help us. Lord, to look to you, Lord, may our minds, be renewed.

Lord, as we're retelling, that story to ourselves, that even we, might not understand it, even though we don't understand, how you turn the pages, in our lives, Lord, we're going to go with you, wherever you go, we're going to go, because you're good.

Lord, we pray that you'd, help us this morning, in Jesus name. Amen.