

This week we begin a series of 3 talks about the book of Ruth. We will do this in a slightly different way to usual. We are going to focus on, or try to focus on, the 3 main characters in the book – Naomi, Boaz and finally Ruth.

But some background first to set the scene.

Ruth the 8th book in the bible follows immediately after the book of Judges. It's a short, four-chapter vignette which summarises the circumstances of a family during some of the tumultuous times outlined in the book of Judges. While the book of Judges shows the inconsistency of God's chosen people, the book of Ruth highlights the faithfulness of God. Here is a story of fearing and loving God, and one another, in a time of defeat and dismay. It can be read as a tale of morality and loyalty, yet it goes far beyond that to uncover in a minimum of words, the key human issues of identity and covenant, and of law and grace.

The book of Ruth primarily takes place in Bethlehem during and immediately following, the season of barley and wheat harvest. According to Jewish liturgy, the scroll of Ruth is to be read at the Shavout – also called the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, which celebrates the grain harvest of the early Summer and commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Today our focus is on Naomi, it is quite difficult to speak of Naomi without the other characters – but I will do my best! It is thought that the name Naomi possibly could mean “sweet, pleasant,” which gives us an idea her character. Naomi, sometimes described as the prodigal daughter of the OT, is the central character in chapter 1 of the book of Ruth. We don't read anywhere in the bible about her exact age but we can assume that she is probably in her late 50's.

Naomi lived during the time when all Israel was governed by the Judges between 1370 and 1031 B.C. She was married to the Bethlehemite Elimelech. Life wasn't easy for her. Escaping famine, she and her family had left Bethlehem as refugees. Even though it led her into enemy territory, she followed her husband-(1:1-2). Naomi was a foreigner in Moab. But then, Elimelech dies. Both sons take Moabite wives but, ten years later, catastrophically both die childless. – no heir. This Bethlehemite family is about to become extinct. Naomi is grief stricken, in a land of strangers she was a desolate widow, broken and lost and in unimaginable emotional pain.

Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are all widows. This must have been really difficult for Naomi, bereaved herself and having two bereaved daughters in laws. She is displaced and bereft. But hearing of the Lord's faithfulness to his people in the land of Judah, she decides to return to her fatherland, urging Ruth and Orpa not to go with her since she can't offer them any hope for the future.

“No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me” (Ruth 1:13).

Both Ruth and Orpah insisted on accompanying her, but after the journey has begun, Naomi seems to have second thoughts. So, speaking to her to her two Moabite daughters in laws

she says she has been thinking of their predicament and urges them to return to their mothers, in the hope that they may begin afresh.

Hearing this, Orpah allows Naomi's speech to persuade her, she kisses her and sets off back to Moab. However, to Naomi's surprise daughter in law, Ruth wants to go with her. Somehow Naomi's faithful living through the years had made an impression on her. In those times, family and marriage were essential for a women's economic survival. So, Naomi doesn't return alone. Ruth decides to go with her: saying:

"Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

Naomi had moved to Moab in order to save her family's life from the famine. Now, when she arrives back in Bethlehem, she is still heartbroken, and an utterly disappointed, woman. The women of the town greet Naomi by name, but she cries, "

"Call me no longer Naomi call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has dealt harshly with me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Ruth 1:20-21)

The name *Mara* means "bitter." The cup of affliction is a bitter cup, but Naomi understood that the affliction came from the God who is sovereign in all things. Little did she know that from this bitter sorrow, great blessings would come to her, her descendants, and the world through Jesus Christ.

But Ruth meets a landowner, Boaz, who is very kind to her. Naomi recognizes the providence of God in providing a kinsman-redeemer for Ruth, declaring that the Lord "whose kindness has not forsaken the living and the dead" (Ruth 2:20) Seeing God's hand in these events, Naomi encourages Ruth to go to Boaz as he slept in the threshing floor in order to request that he redeem her and her property. Naomi's concern was for Ruth's future, that Ruth would gain a husband and provider.

Ruth ultimately marries Boaz and bears a son. According to Israelite laws, this child was counted as a descendant of Naomi's deceased husband and sons, and thus their family line was saved from extinction.

"Then the women said to Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next of kin, and may His name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, borne him" (Ruth 4:14).

So, what can we learn from the character of Naomi

Here in this story, we see how two women, initially strangers, went from being complete strangers to sharing an inseparable bond of friendship

Loyalty: Naomi and Ruth become **loyal friends**. After returning to the land of Judah Ruth and Naomi continued to show loyal love to each other. When life took unexpected turns for them, they struggled, they grieved. But they also remained loyal to each other. **They worked together and supported each other**. Ruth gleaned in Boaz's field to get enough food for them both. They could feel the loyal love of God breaking into their darkness, providing for them moment by moment, day by day. Naomi shows she has faith in what God will achieve through her.

Trust: Trusting in what God could do for them did not keep Ruth and Naomi from acting boldly. They planned together, and through plans that were fulfilled, the story was drawn to a good ending. God used the wisdom of Naomi to move forward his plan for them both

Care, love and Support: The relationship between Naomi and Ruth was one of care, love and support. Naomi as the older woman took on the task of decision-maker (as seen when she decided to return to Judah **and** gave instructions to Ruth concerning Boaz). Naomi was indeed the mother-in-law who meant well for her daughters-in-law.

Redemption: Here we can recognise that all situations can be redeemed by God for his glory and our good. Though Naomi and Ruth lived through tragic circumstances, their story is also full of redemption. The 'kinsman- redeemer' system provided for them (3 – 4) - this was, that, the nearest relative was expected to marry and care for a widow. So, Boaz marries Ruth and Naomi is provided for in her old age. More than that, she became the carer and joyful step God mother of Ruth's baby. This once destitute older woman has a son and a home in Bethlehem

God's word reminds us over and over again that we are to reflect his love in our lives just as Naomi did. The bible assures us that God knows and watches over us when we face difficult times, just as he did with Naomi. **God is faithful** to us, whatever the situation we are in. God never forgot Naomi when she was living in Moab after Elimelech's death. The same goes for us to God knows our every need and is faithful to our needs. Perhaps, sometimes when we are in difficult situations, we think he isn't close but he is there, by our side, not leaving us but, guiding us. This story shows that God can change *any* situation! For him, nothing is hopeless all can be redeemed, there is no circumstance so dark that the light of God's presence and provision cannot redeem it.

Naomi faced her circumstances with boldness and wise and courageous action. We can take great encouragement and inspiration from her life, rejoicing that the same God who showed loyal love to her is also showing his love to us at this very moment.

This story is beautifully written, interestingly we observe how little God is mentioned. The characters talk about God a few times, but the narration hardly ever mentions God explicitly doing anything in the story. This is because God's providence is at work behind every scene, skilfully weaving together the lives of each of the characters just as he weaves our lives together too.