

February 17, 2008

“Ruth: An Introduction”

Ruth 1:1-5

FCF: Longing but unable to see God at work in our circumstances

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because God is “truly good and deeply so”
(magnet) we can trust Him in all things.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Space Shuttle Atlantis spent the last few days docked to the International Space Station. Among other things, this mission has been highlighted by several space walks and delivery of the Columbus module – a permanent space lab for a variety of biology, physiology, fluid physics, and other experiments. Space exploration has come a long way – certainly since the Russians sent Yuri Gagarin into orbit over forty years ago.

Gagarin, you may know, was quoted as saying upon his return ([READ quote](#)), “*When I orbited the Earth in a spaceship, I saw...how beautiful our planet is. Mankind, let us preserve and increase this beauty, and not destroy it!*” Words worth hearing. And so too these ([READ quote](#)): “*I looked and looked but I didn’t see God.*” I say they are worth hearing because they represent how many feel. When considering the state of the world, the state of the church, the state of their lives, many wonder, “*Could there really be a God? I’ve looked and I’ve looked. Where is He?*” Perhaps you feel much the same.

This morning we’re beginning a new series through the book of Ruth – a series that will touch those very questions. And provide us with some startling answers.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Ruth 1:1-5](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

A few preliminary issues. We aren’t sure who wrote Ruth – likely someone with access to royal archives. We aren’t sure of when it was written – likely during Solomon’s reign. There are theories as to its purpose – most likely the origins and legitimacy of King David’s rule. That is, David was not only a man after God’s own heart but a king of God’s own choosing. And, as things unfold, that becomes obvious.

The LORD is clearly the main character, the principal player in this great drama. Which is not to say there are not other players. Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz are characters beloved by anyone who has studied the book. They are part of its appeal. So too is the love story between Ruth and Boaz. So too is the artistry of the way the tale is told. Whoever the author was, they have a way of pulling the reader into the drama.

But there’s more to it than that ([READ 2 Timothy 3:16-17](#)). Paul’s words here apply to the book of Ruth. So too do Jesus’ ([READ Luke 24:25-27, 44-45](#)). These words are God’s words. And these words tell us of His sure unfolding plan to send the Savior this world so desperately needs. That much we can know as we read the book of Ruth.

Now there are certain themes we will see as things progress. God is the main character, the principal player. And it is His faithfulness to His people that frees and impels faithfulness to Him and to one another. Yet we see not only God’s faithfulness but His providence as well – His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all things which then frees and impels us to trust in His care. We see just how strong, wise, merciful, and gracious God really is in a way that is good truly and deeply so. He is good truly and deeply so. Which means we can trust Him. We need to trust Him.

I. TRUSTING GOD IN THE WORST OF TIMES

Even in the worst of times. This was not the best of times. It was among the worst ([READ Ruth 1:1a](#)). This is not just a historical note. It’s a spiritual commentary.

A) *When the Judges Ruled*

This was an era well known to the original audience, a time that threatened fledgling Israel's very survival. And it sets the stage for everything that follows.

1. Description

Under Joshua's leadership, Israel had moved into the promised land of Canaan and had begun the conquest of its people. It was a difficult beginning but one with great potential. That began to shift during the period of the judges. Conquest gave way to compromise – a time of upheavals and adjustments, struggles and temptations. A time summarized repeatedly and tellingly by the author of Judges this way (**READ Judges 21:25**).

2. Cycles

It was a time of apostasy and injustice. A series of cycles set in. The people would stray in their affection for the LORD and obedience to Him. This would bear itself out in their worship of other gods and their ways with one another. He then would bring them back through the nations around them. They would then repent and cry out for deliverance which the LORD would send through “judges” – not tribunals but military leaders.

Such were the cycles. But with each cycle we see also a downward spiral. Things just got progressively worse. The character of the judges, these appointed deliverers, became increasingly dark. The degeneration of the people became increasingly perverse.

B) *A Famine in the Land*

This is the context of the book of Ruth. This is when these events unfold (**READ Ruth 1:1a**). A time when the judges ruled in which there was a famine in the land.

1. Causes – the ruthlessness of the Midianites

Now understand that there was a causal connection between these two – the famine most likely coming about during a period of one of these cycles (**READ Judges 6:1-6**). So, behind the suffering of the famine, we see the ruthlessness of the Midianites.

2. Causes – the faithfulness of the LORD

And behind that, the faithfulness of the LORD. He “gave them over.” He will not let His people go, no matter how bent they are on their own destruction. His passion and purposes for them could not, would not, be moved. He could not, would not, let them go.

This then is the setting, the dark backdrop, to the book of Ruth.

Application:

Which is instructive for us today. Why? Because the darkness of the backdrop does not then mean an absence of God's involvement. It may well be evidence of His concern. Is that not what we see from the cycles and spiraling? The LORD was working through those very things to bring His people back and even to move His plans and purposes forward. Such is the goodness of His faithfulness and His providential control.

Now, carry that over to our times. Think of the parallels to the chaos of today and what we see back then (**READ Judges 21:25**). A rejection of absolute truth, of universal norms of behavior, or the notion that we are part of a larger coherent story. There is no king. And the solution, now like then, is not no king at all but the right king over all.

Listen. Now as then, dark though the backdrop may be, it doesn't mean the absence of God's involvement. It may well be evidence of His concern. It may well be He is working, moving His people back. Just as He did here. The point being that God is good – truly and deeply so. He is at work, always at work. And so, no matter how dark the backdrop, no matter how bad the times – even our times – we can trust Him.

II. TRUSTING GOD AFTER THE WORST OF MISTAKES

Which then takes us to the second thing we see here. We can trust Him even in the worst of times and even after the worst of mistakes (**READ Ruth 1:1**). The author is pointing us here not just to the significance of the times but of the responses to the times.

A) *Leaving the Land*

It meant something for Elimelech and Naomi to have left the land.

1. Who they were

Consider who they were (**READ Ruth 1:2**). “Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah” – likely a clan descended from Caleb, a family of dignity and importance, one of the “first families of Bethlehem.” What would they do? Names are important here. The head of this household was Elimelech – “my God is king.” Would he be true to his name?

2. Where they were

Consider who they were. Consider where they were. Bethlehem – “house of bread.” All this taking place in the promised land – the chosen place through which this chosen people were to go forth, having been blessed by God’s grace to be a blessing for His glory. Consider where they were. It meant something to pack up and leave the land.

B) *Sojourning in Moab*

And it meant something for them to go to Moab as well. These were not neutral choices. The author is communicating something to the reader in the deeper sense as to the movements and descriptions of both where they were and where they were going.

1. History

A little history. The people of Moab got their start from an illicit liaison between Lot and his daughters. The Moabites were known for their worship of Chemosh, a god to whom human sacrifice was made. During the period of the judges, the Moabite king, Eglon, had invaded and enslaved them for eighteen years. Years before that, the Moabite king, Balaak, had tried to work through the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. The whole affair is summarized this way (**READ Deuteronomy 23:3-4**). Choices. Choices.

2. Significance

So, the question is, will Elimelech stay in the “house of bread” or will he leave for where no bread was given? Will he stay or will he go? Again, these were not neutral choices. Events continued to unfold, choices continued to be made, each with yet still more significance (**READ Ruth 1:3-5**). The father dies. Would they then stay or would they finally return? The sons took Moabite wives. Why? The author’s intent seems to be to say that the road of disobedience, once you start on it, gets wider and smoother to travel. Why not go back? We’re not sure. Was it pride? Was it just what they were used to?

Ten years go by and Naomi sees no grandchildren. In time, she is left with no children at all. The attention on the characters is shifting, preparing us for what is coming. “His two sons” becomes “her two sons.” In the end, Naomi is just “the woman” having lost her identity. She has moved from being “with” to “left with” to “left without” – a total loss. It is an utterly gloomy, helpless setting. She is but a lonely old widow in a foreign land.

These choices have left her in a state of barrenness, deadness, and despair.

Application:

So where is God? Can He work in even this – in the least likely of circumstances, after the worst of mistakes? And the answer, unequivocally, is “Yes.” Can He forgive? Can we go back? Oh, not only can we go back, He is at work to bring us back! No matter what has held us back, He is determined to bring us back! Even when we’ve left

from where we never should have left, gone to where we never should have gone, settled where we never should have settled, and done what we never should have done.

But can He work through this? Can He still use us? Well, I don't want to give too much away in terms of the story's unfolding but consider some other cases. Saul, the determined persecutor of Christians, was made Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. Peter, the impulsive fisherman and his abandonment of Jesus at the worst possible hour, was made apostle to the Jews. And so many others (**READ Titus 3:3-8**). Can the LORD forgive us? Can He work through us? Can He ever use us? Listen. He is good truly and deeply so. And so even in the worst of times, even after the worst of mistakes, we can trust Him.

CONCLUSION:

This may have been written sometime during the 10th century B.C. And it may have been written to make clear the legitimacy of King David's throne. But it was written for us. We are just like the people described here – distressed by the chaos of our times, dismayed by the consequences of our choices, tempted by greener pastures, the path of compromise, lacking trust in God's goodness. This was written for us. The events described here don't seem so fanciful because they aren't. We stand in need – just as much as these people did – of the grace of the God who brings outsiders into the fold. More on that as this series progresses. We also stand in need of the grace of God – just as much as these people did – who brings back those who've wandered away, a grace that goes forth and holds true no matter what we've done or how long we've been away.

Truth be told, even our being able to see our need of His grace is a sign of His work in our hearts. And that should encourage us. Those little shoots popping out of the hard ground mean something more is coming. Naomi could tell you it is, at times, a slow and painful work. And some of us here could say the same. But it is always measured and designed to show us the emptiness of our paths that we might turn back to the LORD.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, the pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia years ago, told the story of a small boy sailing his toy boat on a pond. The boat floated out of his reach, and he appealed to a larger boy to help him. This boy, without saying a word, picked up rocks and began throwing them out near the boat. The small boy pleaded with him not to hit his boat, but the older boy kept on. Soon the small boy noticed that each stone was falling on the far side of the boat, making a wave that pushed it nearer the shore. Then he realized that the older boy was planning the fall of each stone in order to bring the boat nearer the shore. Soon it was within reach and the owner had his boat again. The point is obvious and worth attention. We must never forget that God plans the fall of each stone within our circumstances, and that each storm and wave is calculated by Him in order to bring us nearer to Himself. We need to know that.

Perhaps you feel something of that small boy this morning. And maybe it's not a boat that needs to be brought back. Maybe it's you. Be encouraged. God is good truly and deeply so. He is more faithful than we could ever deserve or imagine. Keep reading through this book. We're going to discover quite a bit. Keep reading and be encouraged.

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