

An Outsider Responds

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 January 2016

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now we're going to turn to our Bible reading and this evening we are in the book of Ruth. You'll find chapter 1 on page 222. We're starting a little series on this, a four-week series.

Not every series needs to be as long as Jeremiah. So over the next three Sunday evenings and one Sunday morning in February, we're going to give our attention to this wonderful little story of Ruth.

So, Ruth chapter 1 and we're reading the first chapter. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.

And a man from Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi and the names of his two sons were Malon and Kilion.

They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. At Elimelech, the husband of Naomi died and she was left with her two sons.

[1 : 13] These took Moabite wives. The name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years and both Malon and Kilion died.

So the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then 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.

So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law.

And they went on their way to return to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house.

And may the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of her husband.

[2 : 11] Then 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 am too old to have a husband.

Even I should say I have hope. Even 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. And Naomi said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to our gods.

[3 : 09] Return after your sister-in-law. But Ruth said, Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go.

And where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people. And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there will I be buried.

May the Lord do so to me. And more also, if anything but death parts me from you. And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said, No more.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the woman said, Is this Naomi?

He said to them, Do not call me Naomi. Call me Marah. For the Lord, the Almighty, has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full.

[4 : 11] 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.

So Naomi returned and Ruth, the Moabite, her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Now that's the passage we'll be looking at. Why don't you keep your finger there, please, and turn over to the Gospel of Matthew to page 807. I'm going to read just a few verses here to place this story in its widest context.

Matthew chapter 1, and we'll read from verse 1 to the beginning of verse 6. The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez, and Zerah by Timar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nashon, Nashon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David the king. [5 : 46] Amen. That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts and to our lives. Now, can I ask you, please, to have your Bibles open at Ruth chapter 1, page 222, if you're using the church Bibles.

As we do so, let's have a moment of prayer. Amen. Amen. And God, our Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, I pray that you will take my human words, in all their limitations, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. One of the prominent figures in 18th century London in circles of writers and thinkers was Dr. Samuel Johnson, who, among other things, produced the first usable English dictionary.

Now, Dr. Johnson was a believer, but he had many friends who were skeptics and unbelievers. Very often, he would meet them in the coffee houses, where such people met at the time, and he would discuss the Bible, he defending it, and them attacking it.

One day he said to them, I find a beautiful little story of country life and ordinary people. I'm going to read it to you. And he did. And he read to them this book, we are starting the book of Ruth.

[7 : 27] What do you think of that? They were loud and extravagant in their praise of the simple beauty, of the power of the story. And he said, do you know where I got that from?

Of course not, they said. And he said, the Bible, a book that you despise, a book that you scorn. And that's really the first point I want to make about this story.

It is a beautiful and moving story. Read it, first of all, as a story. Before you try to find lessons out of it, read it as a story. Enjoy it as a story.

It won't take you long. About ten minutes, you can sit down and read the whole story through. It's a short story. It's a story about sorrow, about love, about relationships.

And even on that level, there's a lot to learn. And we'll see this as we go through it. It's a book about ordinary people. Naomi and Boaz were prominent people in Bethlehem.

[8 : 28] But Bethlehem was an insignificant, out-of-the-way village. At that time, you have to remember, at that time, Bethlehem had no particular significance to anybody.

And I think that's a very important lesson in itself. You were here this morning, her Terry's vigorous and sometimes amusing polemic against the celebrity culture.

This is the problem sometimes we feel. Oh, I'm not a big name. I'm not a big personality. I don't get involved in big projects. The Lord can't possibly be interested in me.

Brothers and sisters, the Lord is interested in ordinary people. He made an awful lot of them, after all, didn't he? And he can, of course, use the celebrities.

God can use anybody. But God can use, and does use, ordinary people. So this is a story about ordinary people. Johnson said a story about country life.

[9 : 29] But it's much more than that. If we look at the bookends of the book. Verse 1. The days when the judges ruled.

And just over the page, the very last word of the book. Jesse fathered David. These are the bookends of the story. The reign of the judges. And then the great king, David.

Now, if you read the book of Judges, especially if you read the last four chapters, you'll find a distressing and terrifying story. A story of gang rape.

A story of bloodshed. A story of massive idolatry. And four times in these chapters, including the very last verse, we read this.

In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. That's how this book begins.

[10:27] In this terrifying, in this situation that's spiraling out of control, everybody does what was right in their own eyes. But God has a solution.

And his solution comes in the last verse. David, the great king who is to get rid of that anarchy and so on.

Establish his kingdom. And even more so, lead the way to his greater son. Which, of course, is why we read these verses in Matthew. Ruth has a hugely important part in the big story.

You see, it's a story of ordinary people. It's also a story of big events. God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.

The little stories fitting into the big story. There's just one other piece of background I want to mention. The order of books in our Bible is different from the order in the Hebrew Bible.

[11:28] In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth appears with four other books. The Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Lamentations.

The so-called five scrolls, which are read at the major festivals. Ruth was read in the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. Now, there's a very interesting thing there.

If you look at the order in the Hebrew Bible, Ruth immediately follows Proverbs. Proverbs finishes, Proverbs 31, with the picture of the woman, the wife of noble character.

Exactly the word that is used about Ruth here in chapter 3, verse 11. You are a worthy woman. You are a woman of noble character.

So if you're wondering who the woman of noble character is in Proverbs 31, here at least is one such person. In other words, the book is built into the fabric of the Bible's big story.

[12:33] A general title for this series is There's a Wideness in God's Mercy, taken from a 19th century hymn by the hymn writer Faber, because this book shows God reaching out, reaching out beyond Israel, reaching out beyond the chosen people, indeed in this case, reaching out to the old enemy, Moab.

And the title for this first sermon is An Outsider Response. And the story of chapter 1, which we're going to look at now, develops in three scenes.

It's a story, so you expect it to develop in scenes, in acts, and so on. And first of all, verses 1 to 7, we have a dead-end journey.

This scene is bleak. If you read verses 1 to 7, there is very, very little to encourage. The chaos of the judges and famine.

Now, the writer doesn't exactly say that the famine is caused by the chaos and anarchy of the judges, but it is extremely likely, as happens today in places like Somalia and Sudan, the activities of warlords, while not actually causing the famine, perhaps, make it worse.

[13:53] That's the situation. And a famine, ironically, Bethlehem means the house of bread, the bread basket, if you like. And all of us have experienced something like this at different times in our lives.

You set out with real hope, real expectation, a new chapter opening, a new adventure, and then it turns to dust and ashes.

And this is exactly what happens here. Naomi and Elimelech set out on this journey, journey of 50 miles, not terribly long nowadays, but quite a long journey for that time.

They set out from Bethlehem in Judah. They were Ephrathites. Ephra is the ancient name for Bethlehem in the book of Genesis. There are two things I want you to notice about this opening scene.

First of all, a real tragedy, or a real series of tragedies happen. In many ways, the closest parallel to this in the Bible is the opening chapters of Job.

[15:02] Life has become grey. Future has disappeared. The early promise, the sons marrying, and then death strikes.

We're not told how they died. We're not told anything about the circumstances. Because ultimately, after all, this is death itself, which is the tragedy, isn't it?

This grim frontier post that brings a dead end to all our hopes, catches us in a way that we cannot handle.

Death is terrifying. Three widows, left alone and destitute. Now, the author doesn't comment. Some of the commentators say they were wrong to go to Moab.

That may be the case. The author doesn't emphasize that. I don't think we should import things into the chapter that aren't necessarily there.

[16:03] Were they wrong to go to Moab? We don't know. But God overruled in any case. There are two extremes we can fall into. First of all, thinking that unless we get absolutely everything right, God is not going to be interested.

Well, who among us has ever got everything absolutely right? Looking back, I often feel I've got everything wrong rather than I've got everything right.

And this nonsense, I used to think it rather spiritual, kind of saying God has no eyes but our eyes, no tongues but our tongues. I come to realize that that is nonsense and dangerous nonsense.

That implies that unless we work, God can't work. Where were we when God said let there be light? For example, God has no eyes but our eyes, no voice but our voice.

You see what I mean? Even when we get it wrong, God can and does overrule. And the opposite extreme, of course, is thinking our actions don't matter.

[17:15] It doesn't matter how we live or what we do and God will work things out. Well, that is true as well. As C.S. Lewis said, we will ultimately do the will of God but it will make a big difference to us whether we do it the way Judas did it or the way that John did it.

And you see, in this book, as you'll see this particularly in chapters two and three, the dynamic that drives the story is God's providence and human actions.

In chapter two, we're going to see it seems as if it's all God's providence. In chapter three, it seems as if it's all human action. But it's the two of them together that provide the dynamic.

So, we're faced with this real tragedy. Heartbreak, sorrow, the end of hopes and the end of a promising beginning.

But the second thing I want you to notice about these verses is particularly in verses six and seven. God is at work. Verse six, she heard that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.

[18:27] Now, you can read that on a literal level saying there had been a good harvest following a series of bad harvests and that's true enough. But it's this word visited. This is the great biblical words that's used when God intervenes to save his people.

Remember Luke chapter one, Zechariah says the rising sun from heaven has visited us. When God comes to his people, this great word in both testaments is used.

And this, and this is not just bread in the fields, this is bread from heaven. Yahweh, the Lord has shown that he has not abandoned his people.

And this is the link in the chain which is going to lead us to Emmanuel. Of course, it's why we read these verses in Matthew. From this Moabite girl who leaves her home and everything she's known is to come Emmanuel, God's presence and his very self.

But, from the human point of view, it's a dead end journey. And that's what we find so often in our own lives, isn't it? We're faced with a situation.

[19:41] We wonder why. Why? Why did the Lord allow this to happen? And we don't know. We don't know at the time. Perhaps we'll never know in this world.

There are some questions we won't know the answer to until we reach the Father's house. And so it is here. So, the first movement then, dead end journey.

Secondly, we have a painful conversation. Verse 8 to the first part of verse 19. Once again, we are told nothing of the details of the journey.

And the story moves forward here by dialogue, by conversation. And it's a painful conversation. conversation. But there are one or two things which are very important.

Verse 8. 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. Even the phrase the dead shows the terrifying finality of what's happened.

[20:47] But this phrase, deal kindly, it is the great covenant word mentioned for the first time here. The love that God has for his people. And what our author is suggesting is that the covenant love of God is already at work.

Now, I'm sure Naomi wasn't thinking of it in that way, but nonetheless, the fact the author uses this word, it's extremely important. Now, the other thing is some of the commentators condemn Orpah. I think that's most unfair. Orpah did not, Orpah did not want to leave Naomi. Orpah longed to stay with her.

And, after all, it's Naomi herself who tries to persuade the young woman to return. We've got to remember that we are human and not be super spiritual.

Oh, she should have done this, she should have done that. If I'd been there, I would have done that. How do we know? We know nothing of the circumstances. We know nothing of the situation. So there is, in the background, although it's not visible, and it's not going to be visible immediately, God loves, God's covenant with his people.

[22 : 01] Now, the second thing in verses 12 to 13 is the danger of limiting God. Now, what Naomi says, of course, is perfectly, perfectly reasonable. I'm not going to marry, we don't know what age she would be, but she obviously felt she was too old to marry now, and even if she didn't marry, and even if she was able to have children.

You girls are not going to wait for years and years until they're grown up. You see, it's an impossibility. But, there's something deeper than that.

This is the way we often think in the time of great problems, don't we? I don't know about you, but when I'm faced with a problem and pray about it, my great temptation is to tell the Lord what he ought to do.

You know, Lord, if I were, I don't actually use these words, you know, Lord, if I were you, I would do one of the following things. The Lord, praise his name, not being me, does none of these things. And then, of course, I panic, because I cannot possibly see how a human impossibility can be resolved. And this is the point that's being made here, surely, that Naomi is thinking only in terms of human possibilities, and more especially, human impossibilities.

[23 : 26] And she says in verse, into verse 13, the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. I mentioned Job earlier, that's exactly the phrase that Job uses in chapter 19, that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.

Now, think about that for a minute. It's a terrifying thing. Naomi is obviously feeling trapped as Job felt trapped. She's absolutely right, theologically.

The Bible refuses to allow there to be any other power in the universe equal to God. Prophet Isaiah says, I, the Lord, create good and evil, people.

Because, we tend to think too easily that Satan is equal and opposite to God. He is not. He is of tremendous power, but he is not equal and opposite.

Whatever happens, happens because the Lord's hand has chosen it. And, the solution, of course, lies there as well.

[24 : 33] No power can prevent him from bringing life from death. Human impossibility, of course. You're not going to, I won't have any more sons, and even if I do, you can't possibly wait until they grow up.

We all realize that's nonsense. But, only the Lord can bring life out of death. And, that is the consistent story of the Bible. I always feel when I read the book of Genesis, the end of the book is very dismal.

Joseph died, and was placed in a coffin in Egypt. Very downbeat ending for a book that began in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, until we remember that we believe in a God who knows his way out of the grave.

That is the point. Naomi doesn't know her way out of the grave. We don't know our way out of the grave, but God knows his way out of the grave. So, you see what's happening here.

Naomi is limiting God. In one sense, she's totally orthodox, as God has brought this about. In another sense, she's trying to solve the problem by human reasoning.

[25 : 41] But I think the other thing in this conversation, and it shines brightly, is the faith of Ruth. The passionate and beautiful words of verses 16 and 17.

Do not urge me to leave you, for where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God, my God, where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.

Use the Lord's name to underline that with an oath. Do you realize this young woman from Moab is standing by the side of Abraham himself?

She is doing what Abraham did. And Abraham had the call and the promise. Ruth has neither. By the way, don't misunderstand me.

I'm not saying Ruth is greater than Abraham. That's not what I'm saying at all. What I'm saying is there's an astonishing leap of faith on this young woman's part.

[26 : 45] She is going to commit herself to the Lord of the covenant. Now, we are not Ruth. to coin a phrase, but the all genuine faith is like this.

Hebrews 11 says, whoever comes to God must believe that he is and that he rewards those who diligently seek him. Ruth is an example of that, isn't she?

She came to God believing that he is not the gods of Moab but the God of Israel and he rewards those who diligently seek him.

You see the pain of this conversation though. Orpah leaving, Ruth would no doubt be distressed at Orpah leaving. She would like all of us wonder, have I done the right thing?

Is this too much? But yet she goes in faith. So you see we have the dead end journey. We have the painful conversation and finally in the last few verses, second part of 19 up to the end of the chapter, we have an unhappy arrival.

[27 : 58] Now when they came, the whole town was stirred. Again remember, this is not a worldwide event. This is a small village where everybody knew everybody else.

And the return of Naomi would inevitably be the subject of local gossip. So we mustn't read too much into this. I want you to notice two things here. First of all, that Naomi focuses on herself.

The woman says this, she said, do not call me Naomi, which means sweet or pleasant, and Mara, which means bitter. This again is a challenge to the Lord because you see the Lord has, I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty.

I wonder if there is something here underneath the surface. I went out full. In one sense, Naomi is empty.

In another sense, she is still full, far too full of herself. Naomi is focusing on herself. You know, we use this phrase, so-and-so is full of themselves. Now, I think this may be being suggested here.

[29 : 11] The Almighty has brought calamity on me. She appears to do nothing to welcome Ruth or introduce her, and so on. It's so realistic and so human, because the way Naomi reacts is the way all of us react in a time of tragedy and disaster, isn't it?

We feel cheated. We feel we've been robbed. We feel that God has treated us harshly. Sometimes we're disguising and saying, life hasn't treated me well.

What do mean is God hasn't treated me well? So, Naomi focuses on herself. But that's not how the chapter ends. When did they come to Bethlehem?

At the beginning of the barley harvest. Once again, the book ends of the chapter. There was a famine. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Famine and harvest.

The Lord of the harvest is at work. Both in the physical harvest and in the harvest that's going to follow. We begin to see the outcome of this in chapter two.

[30 : 18] Harvests are a blessing from God. Throughout scripture we get that. In the book of Haggai, for example, the Lord says, the harvests are failing because you've forgotten me.

And in time of Elijah, famine was sent as a punishment in order to bring people back to God. So you see, at the end of this story, not the end of the story, but the end of this section of the story, Naomi is feeling bitter.

I'm sure she's feeling bitter as well as saying, the Lord has dealt bitterly with me. So two things as we come to a close. the first thing is God is at work, behind the scenes.

Not quite so much behind the scenes as in the book of Esther, where his name isn't even mentioned, but nevertheless, he doesn't speak in the book, and his name isn't mentioned a great deal, but he is there.

So often in our own lives, that's the case, isn't it? There are times when we feel the presence of the Lord, but an awful lot of the time, we don't, and we have to live by faith.

[31 : 29] And secondly, he is the Lord of the good times and of the bad times. And this is totally relevant to us, isn't it?

It's easy to believe in the time of barley harvest, that he is the loving God. It's very difficult to believe when the judges are ruling and there's a famine in the land.

So this message is relevant to us, whether as we'll sing in a moment our joy is morning sun, or whether we are weeping in the night. In both these situations, the Lord is in charge.

So may we know much of his blessing in this year we have begun in the company of this wonderful little book of Ruth. Amen. Let's pray. Lord of the harvest, Lord who is still present in times of famine, Lord of our joys and of our sorrows, Lord of our little stories and of the big story.

We pray that as we continue our journey into the unknown that we may indeed be like Ruth. We will not return from following you, that your people shall be our people, and our God, our God.

[32 : 50] And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.