

The Place of Provision and Protection

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon and welcome to this Wednesday lunchtime service here at the Tron. My name is Paul. I'm one of the apprentices here at the church. Some of you will have been expecting Edward. Edward is away on holiday and will be back next week to continue his series in the Psalms.

But for this week, we'll do a standalone in Ruth chapter 1. So if you've got our visitor's Bible, please turn to page 222 for Ruth chapter 1.

Ruth chapter 1.

These two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died.

And she was left with her two sons. These took Moab out wives. The name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years.

[1 : 2 3] And both Mahlon and Chilion died. So the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then she arose with her two 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. 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. 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. 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.

[2 : 2 3] Go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have 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. And she said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law.

But Ruth said to her, 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 I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me. And more also of anything but death parts me from you.

[3 : 23] 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 people said, Is this Naomi? She said to them, Do not call me 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 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. This is the word of the Lord. I wonder what our instincts are when we receive bad news.

Maybe you've been to the doctor and had another test done and faced the challenge of yet another disappointing result. Or you've experienced the difficult situation of being called into the boss's office and the conversation beginning with, I'm sorry, I don't think it's working out.

[4 : 43] Or had the gut-wrenching experience of receiving a phone call explaining that the loved one you kissed goodbye to that morning has been involved in a terrible accident.

When our world is falling apart around us, where do we turn? When all seems lost, do we stay or do we go?

Naomi and her family lived in a desperate time in the land that God had provided for his people, the land that he had promised to Abraham, the land that was to flow with milk and with honey.

In that land, there was a famine. Famine in the land of Israel was often linked to the nation's faithfulness. If they served the Lord, there was plenty.

If they did what pleased themselves, famine may have come. And in those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. So what will Naomi and Elimelech do?

[5 : 44] We're going to look at the passage today under two headings. The first of them being this, a weeping wanderer, a weeping wanderer. When things got tough, Naomi and Elimelech left behind their land and their God.

In times of difficulty, it's natural for us to seek refuge in change. The grass is always greener. That's exactly what Elimelech and Naomi did.

The thing that we would all do. There's a famine at home. How can I provide for my family? For my boys. You can imagine their despair of having to leave. Of feeling that they must go.

Leaving behind their inheritance. Their place in God's promised land. Leaving behind their stake amongst God's people. They strike out. The grass is always greener.

They leave behind the provision of God. To choose to walk away from the promised land was a massive thing. They leave behind the place that God had promised would be a blessing to the world. They must have been desperate.

[6 : 49] The grass is always greener. They leave and they head for Moab. For Moab? That's a strange choice.

Not only are they leaving behind the land of God's promise, provision and protection. But they head for a land of opposition to God's people. If you were to turn to Judges 3 later on, you'd see that the people of Moab are in fact enemies of Israel, God's people.

Moab is a very strange choice. By verse 2, although painful, we're feeling pretty positive. They've left the land of famine and headed for a land of hopeful food.

But verse 3, disaster continues to dominate. Far from home, Naomi loses her husband and by verse 5, her two sons as well. This weeping wonder has gone from a land of hopeless famine to utter despair.

Nothing has gone her way. She now lives abroad. Her closest relatives, two acquired foreign wives of two dead sons. Life is out of control and there's nothing that she can do.

[8 : 04] Naomi is apparently destined for destitution. And she is convinced that the Lord has done it. For all of us, to different extents, we'll have found our lives to be like this.

Life turned on its head. Often we feel like we're in the passenger seat, not in the driver's seat. Some of us here will have had plenty of similar things happen. Whether the painful difficulty of sickness slowing us down or tearing joy from our lives.

The shock of losing a job and the provision it brings. Or the sudden loss of family. The true travesties of life. These may even be our current daily experience.

In those moments we know we aren't in control. It seems there's nothing we can do to turn the tide. We can start to think it's us. By verse 6, Naomi had heard word in Moab that God had provided for his people back in Judah.

He's given them food. He's filled their bellies. The land is again flowing with milk and honey. The grass is always greener. And so she sets out. Heading back for the land of God's provision.

[9 : 16] Heading back for her home and her family. It seems she has recognized that God is the only one she can trust for provision. But she does so bitterly.

A broken woman. Squirming and struggling. She left unable to provide for two sons. She returns. Knowing her inability to provide for two daughters.

Gently she tries to urge them to stay. To return to their families. She prays God's kindness upon them. Considering his kindness far from herself. She is still a woman of faith.

But a bitter one. The Lord has placed Naomi in a situation where she has nothing left. But to cling to him. Sometimes he'll do that to us too.

She's returning to the land. But she doesn't expect the Lord to return to her. It's worth noting at this point the word return. We see it first in verse 7. And again in verses 10, 15, 16 and 22.

[10 : 20] The word return portrays in this chapter the idea of repenting. Reorienting life to a particular land. Naomi is repenting and turning back to God's country.

To the land of Israel. That's what she encourages of her daughters as well. But in the other direction. She tells them to turn back to their gods. To repent to their gods. Her daughters push back.

But she stands resolute in her weeping. There's no use. There's no point in coming. There's no man to protect or provide for you. Remember this in a culture, a society where men, a family without men in it.

Women are as good as dead. Homeless and helpless. Her view of what has happened is finally declared in verse 13 and repeated in verse 20.

Verse 13 says, The Lord has gone out against me. If you want misery, come with me, she says. If you want life of destitution, cling to me.

[11 : 23] If you're baited by bitterness, this is the place for you. But go, she says. Go from me. For the Lord is against me. This weeping wanderer seeks a painful parting.

Instead of everything she touches turning to gold, she says. Everything turns to the foul stench of death. Bitterness is my name.

Naomi is returning to the land that is broken, hurting, and hopeless. Life is bitter. And the Lord is against her. When the going gets tough, we start to feel this way too.

Whether we verbalize them or not, we think deeply. Keep her questions. Why is this happening to me? To us? Why has God left me here in this?

For some of us, we deal with the problems by simply leaving. Sometimes it can be difficult to stay in church amongst people that know you and ask questions. With God's people.

[12 : 31] Particularly when life is difficult, it can be hard. Often it seems far, far easier to just simply walk away. Our temptation is to leave behind family.

To hide in solitude and hope beyond hope that things will get better. For some of us, we don't go physically, but we do mentally and spiritually.

Holding on to bitterness or being convinced that the Lord is against us. It's okay to feel this way. Life in this fallen world is going to be messy and stressy.

Life in a world marred by the fall and cursed by human sin is going to be distressing. It's okay to feel this way, but we must not stay this way.

In verses 19 to 21, we see that Naomi at this stage has stayed this way. She ignores the blessing of a faithful daughter-in-law.

[13 : 30] The one who's appeared to live by her in destitution. To stay with her. And declares herself bitter. Emptied by the Lord. Uncertain of why calamity is upon her.

We can't be certain of when and why Ruth was written. But my guess is that the book was written during a difficult period for the land of Judah. A time where it would be far easier to turn to worshipping the gods of the nations around.

Than sticking with the one true God. The grass is always greener. If it seems like the Lord hasn't been faithful to his promises to us. Why should we be faithful to him?

Well, that's where we see the contrast of Ruth chapter 1. Naomi was the weeping wanderer. Ruth, the Moabite, is the clinging foreigner.

That's our second heading for today. The clinging foreigner. When the going got tough, Ruth was given an out. But she clung on.

[14 : 35] Please look with me at verse 14. Here we see two responses. Orpah bids her mother-in-law farewell and heads for home. But Ruth, she clings on.

She sees the stark reality of her situation and that of her mother-in-law's. But in spite of it all, she clings. Notice if you read from verse 14 into verse 19, the story would continue completely uninterrupted.

But the writer here needs us to see why she is clinging. It isn't simply some purity of character or only care for her mother-in-law, although it is both of those things.

Orpah, her sister-in-law, had returned to her gods, verse 15. Ruth isn't just clinging to Naomi, but to Naomi's God as well. Please look at verse 16.

Notice the phrasing of her commitment. But Ruth said, She was just by stating the choice that she has offered.

[16 : 05] Repenting, turning back to her own gods and her old family. Or clinging to Naomi and clinging to the Lord. And then, whether she knew it or not, she imitated the sentiment of the Lord himself.

She shows the same commitment to her mother-in-law as the Lord had declared to his people. Way back while Israel were still under the oppression of Egypt, God had said this, I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

His declaration, His covenant promise was to Moses and the people of his day, but not to them only. He was faithful to his covenant throughout history to his people.

To those who wandered in the wilderness, he dwelt amongst them. His presence dwelt in the tabernacle. It was clear to all that they were his people, and that he was their God.

As they entered the promised land, this too happened. His promises of a place flowing with milk and honey that would bless the world started to come true. And so for the day of the first readers, the covenant still stood.

[17 : 21] God had clung himself to his people, much like Ruth had clung herself to him. This is what God's people have always needed to do.

This is what we must be seeking to do today. We must be a people who cling to the great king, the Lord himself, for he clings himself to us.

And the promise still stands for us as well. In fact, as the Bible strikes its final notes, the long-standing melody of God's commitment to his people is heard.

The apostle John in the book of Revelation witnessed this. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people.

[18 : 25] And God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

At the end of days, the closing curtain of history, God's people will live with God fully and finally.

As the new Jerusalem is brought to earth, the covenant commitment of God sees its final crescendo. At last it is certain and complete. He will dwell with his people.

They will be his, and he will be theirs. The great effect of this reality, he will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.

Mourning and crying and pain will have come to an end, for God will have made it so. Notice, this is what we have seen of God in Ruth chapter 1.

[19 : 32] Though the famine had come on the land, by verse 6, God quickly had visited and brought food. Verse 22 declares the beginning of the barley harvest.

These are the first fruits of God's provision for his people in that day. The certainty of his character had given way to hope for the future. The call for them then and us now sits then as this.

When the going gets tough, God's people must cling to him. That is what Ruth did, and what Naomi did through tear-stained eyes. The foreigner clung to the uncertain native.

The foreigner clung to the faithful Lord. The choice to go to Moab seemed a strange one. On the face of it, so does this. Did Ruth cling because she didn't know any better?

She clung to a woman who seemed to bring only pain. A widow. Destitute. So Christians today, we cling to something which seems weak and destitute.

[20 : 37] God doesn't visibly reign in power today. He hasn't got a temple or a palace we can visit him in. He doesn't have one nation in the world he's chosen to dwell with.

But he does have one people. He does have a place where the fruit of his work is visible. The church. The place which often seems weak and destitute.

The land of God's blessing today is the gathering of his people. So for us, when the going gets tough, yes, we cling to him in prayer. We turn to him with our pains and our pangs.

For he is the kind provider, the faithful God. But we too must stay. We must stay with his people. Not out of bitterness, but out of hope. A hope that is nestled and secured by his proven faithfulness.

A hope that is cemented by his sure and certain word. If we've wondered, seeking to find our security in any other land than the land of Christ's church, we must, as Naomi and Ruth did, repent, return, turn our lives back towards God's church.

[21 : 48] For God is the God of provision. God is the God of protection. He is the only place of refuge for us when we face trials of any kind. Whenever we face suffering and difficulty, we must not run from the Lord, but ask for his provision and protection.

When faced with a stark and painful stench of death in our lives, we must remember that he is the Lord who brings life. He is the one who defeats death.

He is the one who, as we saw in Revelation, brings death to its end. We are not a people of instant relief, but certain hope-filled people.

Refuge from these things is not found outside of him, away from his land of blessing, away from his people. We must return to the land. We must return to the Lord.

When the going gets tough, what do we do? We must return. We must cling to Yahweh, to the Lord, to his faithfulness, and to his people.

[23 : 00] So as we finish, let me say just one further thing. Ruth chapter 1 is a story of the weeping wanderer and a clinging foreigner, but it's about someone far, far greater.

It's about the faithful covenanter, a promise-keeping God, the great provider and protector of his people. Notice verse 1 starts with the phrase, in the days when the judges ruled.

Now the judges were the military leaders of Israel. In the book of Judges, we are introduced to them and we see there the repeating pattern. God's people would revolt against him before groaning for rescue.

He would graciously provide that rescue and their repentance would follow before the whole thing would be repeated again. Revolts, groan, rescue, repent, repeat.

The book of Judges begins in the days when the judges ruled. When everyone did as pleased himself to disastrous effect, it ends with a tiny nod to the great saving king, Ruth's great-grandson, King David.

[24 : 11] He would be a rescuer for his people. God is always working to rescue his people. And we know, we trust, we cling to his greater son, the Lord Jesus.

The encouragement of this chapter is that God is faithfully at work in the smaller things. He provided food for those in the famine and a faithful daughter-in-law in the midst of turmoil for Naomi.

But the book of Ruth also teaches us that he works in the bigger things, bringing his people a rescuing king who would end the pattern, the pattern of revolts. Ultimately, the Lord Jesus.

It is he who would finally bring death to its end. It is he in whom the harvest begins. The God of the Bible is a faithful God. Let us return and cling to him.

Amen. Let's pray. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

[25 : 23] Therefore, we will not fear, though earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

Almighty God, our Father, we praise you that you are always faithful, though we often flounder. We praise you that in your son we have a certain hope amidst life's trials, that you are our refuge in deep distress.

Be our strength, we pray, in the name of your son and for his glory. Amen.