

Escaping from a shady past

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this is our first talk in a series this month on the Book of Ruth from the Old Testament. And you might like to turn that up. It's page 222.

And we'll be reading from chapter 1. We'll read chapter 1, verses 1 to 5. And I'll read it. Page 222.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And a man of 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 Mathon 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 Moabite wives, and the name of one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years. And both Mahon and Chilion died.

[1 : 1 0] So that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Left without her two sons and her husband.

And friends, sometimes in life, everything seems to conspire against us, doesn't it? I don't know if that's been your experience in life, perhaps in recent times.

You and I, you know, we've at times plumbed the depths of disappointment, anxiety, depression, sorrow and grief.

I know that if we had time and we were all able to have a chat together about these things, maybe there'd be some tears shed on the pews.

You know, we can sort of put on a brave face, can't we? But behind the scenes, our lives can be in turmoil. Are you with me? Perhaps no one at work knows what's going on inside our hearts or our homes.

[2 : 1 8] Today, Naomi, she comes to meet us. Her heart beats with ours. Here it is.

This is the scene before us. It's the world of Naomi. And friends, it's the world we inhabit. And we move now to think about where Ruth lies in God's great unfolding plan of salvation.

And the beginning of verse 1, if you look at it, the beginning of verse 1, it staples these four chapters to the end of Judges. God's people had been brought into the Promised Land.

Do you remember who brought God's people into the Promised Land? Do we remember? Joshua, that's right, yes. You can see the book of Joshua.

If you go back, you go back through Judges and then you'll get to Joshua. So Joshua brought God's people into the Promised Land. You know, that land overflowing with milk and honey.

[3 : 2 3] Exodus chapter 3. So different to Egypt, isn't it? So different to those desert wanderings. But the book of Judges recounts, listen, the fragmentation of God's people.

Let's have a look. Just go back to the book of Judges. Go right to the beginning of the book of Judges. It's the previous book in the Bible. It's chapter 2. I'll just read this to give us a taste of the moral climate back then.

Chapter 2 and verse 11 and 12. You'll see the heading there, Israel's Unfaithfulness. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals.

And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them and bowed down to them.

And they provoked the Lord to anger. So God raises one deliverer after another. Judges. Now these aren't the sort of judges that you might meet in a court today.

[4 : 28] I don't know if any of you have been in a court. Maybe you've been on jury service. They're not the judges we see today with wigs on in the court. No, these were sort of charismatic, prophet-like figures from the Old Testament.

I remember from Cornhill, I've just remembered we used to call people like that and the prophets, we'd call them covenant law enforcement officers. So these are the judges.

But it's a downward spiral. And listen, it's the way of Adam in the last verse. Have a look at the very last verse of Judges.

And we'll see this. We'll just see that it's the pattern of Adam. And really, it's you and me as well in our innermost thoughts when we're entertaining sin.

No king in our lives in those dark moments when we ignore God. Have a look at the very last verse of Judges. And in honesty, ask yourself if it's ever been a picture of your soul.

[5 : 30] And what I'm going to do, I'm going to transpose this, and I'm going to put my name in here because I know it's true about me from the past and also if I sin in the present.

In those days, there was no king in Alex's life. He did what was right in his own eyes. Do you see? I hope this is making sense so far.

You know, we're not as far from the book of Judges as we like to think, are we, friends? And we turn to Ruth.

And friends, well, it's all compounded. Have a look at verse 1 in Ruth. Chapter 1, verse 1. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to Sodom in the country of Moab.

Moab. He and his wife and his two sons. I hope this is sort of making sense. You know, for a Jew, well, think about this. For a Jew, verse 1 is as shocking as 9-11 was for us.

[6 : 32] Verse 1 is CNN filming a major catastrophe. It's beamed onto our screens. A hurricane hits God's family. Genesis, chapter 1.

God brings order out of chaos, doesn't he? Do you remember? Light out of darkness. But verses 1-5 here are a reversal. Entropy, the scientists call such a thing.

It's Genesis, chapter 3, revisited. Listen. Sin, judgment, death, and more. Naomi's displaced into an alien land.

Chaos and disintegration. They've travelled from Bethlehem to Moab. What a shock! It's like going back to Egypt. And is there someone here?

You know, spiritually, you've moved away from Bethlehem to Moab. Away from God's people. Moab, well, Moab was east of the Dead Sea.

[7 : 36] And on the 19th of August, 1868, some archaeologists were digging around and they found the Moabite stone.

And if you look at the Moabite stone, there's an inscription on it. And it talks about the king of Moab and how he was attacking the king of Israel. You can actually go and have a look at it.

Omri, the king of Israel in those times. It's in the Louvre in Paris, which I assume is a museum. Is the Louvre a museum in Paris? Yeah, I thought it must be.

Apparently, you can go and see the Moabite stone. Sinclair says this in his very good book for four pounds. On page 31, he says, Moab spelt a near nation from God and from his promises.

Its worship involved the gods of nature. Such a fertility cult, which in the ancient Near East often included sexual activity and ritual prostitution, was an abomination to the Lord.

[8 : 41] So, we, friends, we rub shoulders. Think about this. We rub shoulders with Moabites every day.

The people of Moabite. Our 21st century society is very Moabitish, if you think about it. We know it. The government knows it.

Respect is the latest policy, isn't it? Tony says, let's see if we can engender respect. That's really what's in the headlines at the moment. But think about this.

Will the government be able to bring society back from Moab to Bethlehem? What do we think? Here's the evening times. This is Monday's evening times.

And it talks about a bill that's going through the Scottish Parliament at the moment. The headlines are, new laws to help cops get tough on Scots crime.

[9 : 39] We drift, don't we, as humans? Do you see the gravitation away from God's blessings then and now?

We're very good at that. Just look around the world today, friends. Family Elimelech walked away from God's blessings. The promised land, the bridgehead into eternal security.

They just turned their backs and walked away. It was a sojourn, the text says. But that sort of temporary secondment to Moab, well, it grew from one season to another, one year into the next, and we slip into areas of sin, friends, don't we?

We take up residence in Moab. So is it the end for the Elimelech family here? What can God do with the chaos of verse 1?

What can he do with our lives, our churches? His resources are there if you have a look in verse 1. Do you see? And it all seems to me, well, it seems a non-starter, isn't it?

[10 : 47] A disobedient nation, a disobedient family, the pull of Moab. It's a messy, sticky, tangled old life, isn't it?

A bit like yours and mine. We're the product of our decisions, aren't we, if you think about it. And a lot of them haven't been pleasing to God, have they, friend?

So what can God do here with these resources? And the question is, can God incorporate our untidy lives in his unfolding plans and purposes?

It'd be easier, wouldn't it, to throw his people out onto the pavement, you know, like all the rubbish you see out of the tenements, waiting for the bin men to collect it. That would be easy, nice and tidy.

Do you see? He could do that, couldn't he? To be just of God, to do such a thing? To discard his people? But Noah, think about this, Noah found favour, didn't he?

[11 : 46] Where does Ruth the Moabite fit in? Have a look with me at the very last word of the book of Ruth. Just turn it up. The very last word of the book of Ruth.

Do you see someone's name there? Who is it? Make sure you're awake and you're following us. David, isn't it? Isn't that marvellous, David?

David, that is King David. So do you see, listen, do you follow this? Ruth is a bridge, do you see this? Ruth is a bridge from the chaos of judges into the regal splendour of King David.

Are you with me? From chaos to order. Are you following? And so Ruth, obediently and humbly, she plays her part in integrating God's awesome unfolding plans and purposes.

Well, that was our introduction. And a little bit of an overview of the book of view and placing it in God's unfolding plans and purposes.

[12 : 52] Let's have a look now more closely at the text of our passage today. So it wasn't verse 1, a sojourn in Moab, no.

The Elimelech family, well, they sort of put down anchor, didn't they? Verse 4. Ten years! And have a look with me there at verse 5. And both Mahon and Chilion died.

So the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. End of the line. It's a cul-de-sac, isn't it? Think about this. It's a cul-de-sac for family Elimelech.

No sons to carry the family name, do you see? And the British Medical Journal, last month they wrote that if you're over 30 years of age, it's especially difficult to conceive.

And Naomi, well, if you're listening and you're reading the BMJ report, it's more especially difficult to conceive if you've not got a husband. And this is Naomi, isn't it?

[13 : 55] What will she do? Blend into Moab? After all, well, it's been over 10 years now, hasn't it? Should she just sort of accept the hand that God's dealt her?

Kei surah, surah, whatever will be, will be. And the Lord sometimes brings us to such moments in life, doesn't he, friends?

Is this moment yours? Listen to what A.W. Tozer wrote about the Christian life. This is a Christian. He is strongest when he is weak and weakest when he is strong.

He is highest when he feels lowest and lowest when he feels highest. Friends, is that you? Weak? Feeling low? No. It's Naomi. Verse 6.

Have a look with me. The tide begins to turn. Then she arose, you know, like a phoenix out of the ashes, in brackets, with her daughters-in-law, to return from the country of Moab.

[14 : 55] For she had heard in the fields, that's where she worked, of Moab, that the Lord had visited his people and given them what, you see? Food. Food.

If you think back, verse 1, what was the problem? It was a famine. Here, verse 6, there's food. And Naomi's up and she's homeward bound. And Luke chapter 15, verse 17, the prodigal son comes to his senses, doesn't he?

He stands up and he turns and he goes home. He walks away from those pig troughs. Naomi here, she's like, well, I guess she's like a soldier, isn't she, at the end of a tour of duty.

But she can't just pick up her cases and put them on the coach like Ben seems to do here nearly every week when he's going down to London. She can't just do that. No.

She's got those daughter-in-law, hasn't she? Bit of a dilemma. What's she going to do? What's she going to do with them? They're hot on her heels, verse 7.

[15 : 52] Have a look with me at verse 8. 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. She said, go back to Moab.

Get her husband back in Moab. And that's poignant, isn't it, at the end there? Then she kissed them and they lifted up their voices and wept. To kiss. It's not just words, is it, now?

It's actually happening. It's like being on platform one. The guard blows his whistle. Do you remember those old train doors that used to slam shut?

They're all slamming shut on a dark, damp morning and the train slowly pulling away out of platform one, waving your son or your daughter off. Yes, it's really happening.

[16 : 52] And here it's sealed with a kiss. And they lifted up their voices and wept. Verse 10. What do they say?

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. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this very 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 for me, for your sake, that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.

If I was an artist, I would paint this scene. I'd be able to paint it. Just look at verse 14. Then they lifted up their voices and wept again.

[17 : 52] And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law. But what? Do you see that there? But Ruth clung to her. I'd paint this scene. It's the profound choice that we all face.

Both roads leading ultimately into eternity. Am I right? Orpah, she chooses to go on the broad road and she's turning back to Moab, to the made-up religions of the world.

But Ruth's arms, they're wrapped around Naomi, aren't they? They're entwined together. The city of God drawing them both home. I'd hang it up, the picture, and entitle it.

But Ruth clung to her. And beloved, have you got someone to cling to? When this life, you know, it seems nothing but dead ends.

For Ruth's clinging to more than Naomi, isn't she, if you think about it. She's wrapping her hands around Israel, the family of God. Forsaking her home and all this world offers.

[18 : 58] Truly I say to you, says Jesus, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time and in the age to come, eternal life.

Verse 15. And she said, see your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law.

Do what me and your father-in-law did ten years back. Go to Moab. Naomi's shocking here, isn't she? She really is. We like to invite people into the kingdom of God, don't we?

Come to the Christianity Explored course. She's doing her best to send them away, isn't she, Naomi? If she was on Buchanan Street, I'd be praying that she'd lose her voice.

But she's persistent. Verse 8. Go, return. Verse 11. Turn back. Verse 12. Turn back. Verse 15. Return. Shut up, Naomi.

[19 : 59] Amidst it all, God has the affection of Ruth. And Naomi's words are falling on deaf ears. And we're coming towards some of the most, well, some of the most moving poetry ever uttered this side of heaven.

You could have these words as marriage vows. Just look with me there at verse 16. 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 they walk on in silence, don't they? Sometimes, sometimes feeling, friends, they convey more than words, don't they? A shared understanding. And the prodigal son walked away in silence, didn't he?

[21 : 07] Those pig troughs in the distance getting smaller and smaller. He almost walks with them as Moab gets smaller and smaller in the distance. And friends, as you walk into God's family, into the arms of Jesus, he deals with that part of your life that you'd sooner forget.

For I am gentle and lonely in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, he says. Orpah, she's in the distance now. She's looking on, isn't she? Looking on.

She's been waving, and she sees Naomi and Ruth disappearing into the distance. She stops waving, she folds her arm, and she turns back to Moab. To which city, friend, are you heading?

What does your future hold? Ruth and Naomi, they know where they're going, don't they? We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling, and needing more each day, your grace to know.

Yet from our hearts, a song of triumph feeling, we trust in you, and in your name we go. Yet from our hearts, a song of triumph feeling, we trust in you, and in your name we go.

[22 : 18] So they arrive in Bethlehem, don't they? And the whole town stirred. She'd left ten years previously with her husband and her two lads, her wanes.

But she comes back, doesn't she, ten years later without them. More wrinkles, more grey hairs, more of those scars that we get in life. She's been through the mill, hasn't she?

Is this Naomi they're all saying? And have you ever tried to hide from yourself? Naomi does there in verse 20. She said to them, Do not call me Naomi, 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 on me? As we finish, friends, pull your life alongside chapter 1.

Pull your life alongside chapter 1 and just see what God can do. Verse 1, think back, was full. It was full, wasn't it, of disintegration and chaos.

[23 : 22] But verse 22 is full of potential. It's the eve of rich blessing. And as of old, God has woven order into chaos.

Look there at verse 22. 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.

It's Bethlehem, isn't it? It's the beginning of the barley harvest. And Boaz is waiting in the wings, isn't he? Here it is.

This is what the Lord can do, friends. It's a life caught up in the covenantal love of God. A life looking forward to rich blessing, and a life bound together with God's people.

Shall we pray? Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for these amazing events.

[24 : 30] We thank you that you called Ruth to yourself, you drew Naomi home. We thank you for that, Father, and we pray that you'd catch our lives up in that. You'd keep us close to you.

You'd wrap your arms around us, as it were. And we pray, Father, that we'd all be learning something from this passage, something that helps us to glorify you in the way in which we interact with this world.

So may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of his Holy Spirit, be with us all this day and forevermore.

Amen.