

Ruth 1

Preached at 8.15 and C@10 on 12th October 2014

Intro

Do you ever wonder whether your life is all that important in God's great plan and purposes?

The well-known atheist, Richard Dawkins, believes that if the kind of God Christians believe in really did exist – who created the vastness of this universe – then to think that such a God would care about how the seemingly insignificant matters of our daily lives would concern him is just ridiculous.

In the book of Ruth we have a story of one family.

There's no family history leading up to the story of their lives – they're just ordinary people.

It's the story of a woman named Naomi who tragically loses her husband, then her two sons while living in a foreign land. It's the story of one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth – a foreigner and herself a widow, who sticks with her mother-in-law.

And it's the story of a man named Boaz – a relative of Naomi's late husband – who shows great kindness to these women.

We might think of them as the actors in a movie – the ones in front of the camera.

But behind the scenes is the one who has not only written the script, but is there directing the lives of the actors.

Although we don't see him directly in this story, God is the one who's bringing these people out of sadness and tragedy to a happy ending, as he works through their ordinary lives.

The story of Ruth is set during the period of the Judges – one of the worst times in Israel's history.

The final verse of Judges, which is the book right before Ruth in our English Bibles, sets the scene for the events in Ruth, when it says:

“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” (Judges 21:25)

God’s people as a whole had rejected the rule of their true king – the God who had saved them and established them as his people.

Yet God shows himself through this story to be faithful to his promise to bless people who take his word seriously and trust him.

So I pray that we’ll see God’s faithfulness and kindness to individual people through this story, and that we’ll take these words to heart, so that we’ll trust this God who loves us even more.

Trusting God in Suffering

The opening chapter of Ruth is the story of family tragedy.

The name of Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, means ‘My God is King’, and Naomi means ‘pleasant’ or ‘delightful’. They appear to be a godly, happy family.

The famine that comes on Israel may be the result of the chaotic state of the nation where everyone is just looking out for his own interests. (Maybe there’s something for us to think about with so many people starving in the world today).

Whether it was the right or wrong thing to do, Elimelech takes his family to neighbouring Moab for a while so that they can survive the famine.

And while there in a foreign country, Naomi suffers the loss of her husband.

Both her sons had married local Moabite women. Their wives weren’t Israelites and so they didn’t know the true God – they and their families worshipped the false gods of Moab (as we see in v15).

But then tragedy struck again, and both Naomi’s sons died – each leaving a widow and no children – no one to carry on the family name.

Naomi’s family escaped the famine only to be devastated by the death of all the men of the family.

But even though she's suffered such tragedy, Naomi knows that Israel's covenant-keeping God is in control of it all.

She doesn't just put her experience down to random bad luck.

Last week I met up with some old school friends – one I hadn't seen for about 10 years, and it took me a minute to recognise him.

When Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem, her experience has changed her so much that the women of the town hardly recognise her, asking (v19) 'can this be Naomi?'

And her answer to them in v20-21 shows that she knows that it was the LORD who sent her away full and has brought her back empty and bitter.

Tragedy can often be make or break time when people's faith in God is challenged.

Naomi is bitter and we can sympathise with her. It's not that we can't be angry or question God when go through such sadness.

But too many people take that affliction as a sign that God doesn't care about me – that my life doesn't matter in his grand plan – or that he isn't in control of what happens to me.

And even people who call themselves believers walk away from God.

But Naomi, even in her bitterness, walks back to Him, as she turns and heads back to Judah.

She knew how God had kept his covenant with his people up to that time.

And as the story of Ruth unfolds, we'll see that God is working to keep his covenant promises to restore blessing not only to Naomi, but to the world.

Covenant Love and Faithfulness

One of my uncles, when he was divorced from his first wife, continued to visit and look after his widowed mother-in-law.

I remember as a kid not quite understanding how this lady fitted into our family. But my uncle faithfully visited her and took care of things around the house for her until she died.

It was like he'd made a promise to her when he married her daughter. And he kept that promise.

When Naomi heard that God had ended the famine in Judah and headed for home, both her daughters-in-law initially set out with her.

But then she tells them (v8) to turn around and go back to their own people.

She prays the LORD's blessing on them – that he'll show them the same kindness that they have shown to their late husbands and to herself.

But when they refuse to leave her, she spells out what it would mean for them to go back with her. It would mean the same bitter life that Naomi was convinced she was destined for – as a widow, with no prospect of Naomi providing another son for them to marry to carry on their husband's names according to Israelite law.

Orpah is finally convinced, and turns around to go back (v15) to her people and her gods.

And here's the first major point of the story.

Ruth doesn't go back to her people and her gods. She clings to Naomi.

And she says in v16:

“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there be buried.”

Ruth makes a covenant with Naomi to never be separated from her, and to show her loving kindness as long as she lives.

Orpah had done what seemed most sensible from a human point of view.

But Ruth doesn't do what seemed best for her. In fact she sacrificed her own prospects so that she could continue to show loving kindness to Naomi.

We should be inspired to imitate Ruth's example here because it's an example of what it means to love our neighbour as ourselves, even when it will cost us.

But that's not the major point.

At the centre of her promise to Naomi is her promise to make Naomi's God her own.

Ruth is not an Israelite. She's a Gentile.

And here in this small, seemingly insignificant family situation, God is at work to fulfil his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3

"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

As she binds herself to God's people in her covenant with Naomi, God binds Ruth to himself.

Ruth – the Gentile woman – is joined to the people of God, and comes to share in all the benefits of *his* covenant love and kindness.

...because Ruth decides that Naomi's God – the LORD – the God who keeps his covenant and promises – will be her God and Lord of her life.

In the life of one woman, God is fulfilling his promise to bless the peoples of the earth.

And through her, that blessing will flow to many.

As we'll see later in the story, Ruth will be given a place in the ancestry of the One who brings blessing to the whole world – Jesus Christ, as we read in Matthew 1:5.

Is God interested in the small lives of ordinary people? Of course he is.

He works in extraordinary ways in ordinary people who come to him and trust him, to fulfil his promise to bless all the peoples of the earth.

...which brings us to the final point – Ruth's response to God.

Returning to God

Quite literally, Naomi sets out to return to the land God gave to his people.

But Ruth isn't going 'back' – she was from Moab. She was going to a new land and a new way of life with a new people.

But in another sense she is going back. She's returning to the true God that we've all walked away from.

In her promise to Naomi, Ruth isn't just swapping the statues of her false Moabite gods for one of the God of Naomi's people.

She's come to understand that there's a true God who she can trust with her life.

In v17 she seals her promise to Naomi by calling the LORD to take her life if she reneges on it before she dies – showing that she knows this is the God with the power of death – and therefore life – over her.

And so Ruth comes back to God by putting her faith or trust in him and in the promises he's made for those who love and trust him.

And she enters into the promise of his blessings.

Ruth is a model of our response to the promises of God in the gospel.

Common sense would have told her to go back to her old ways – her people and their gods.

Often common sense tells us the same – serve the idols and false gods of this world, and make yourself comfortable among the people of this world.

But the promise of God in the gospel calls us out of this world – away from its idols and ultimately empty way of life – and back to the God who promises to bless.

As Ruth goes back with Naomi to Judah, she comes home to God, putting her faith in Israel's God.

And God continues to include people from all the nations on earth in his covenant love and kindness, as we likewise put our faith in him.

In the story of Ruth, we have a response of faith in God, that God used to continue the unfolding plan of salvation that was fully revealed in her descendant, the Saviour, Jesus Christ.

As we trust our lives to Jesus, and turn away from the world and its false gods, God binds us to himself in an everlasting covenant of loving kindness.

If you haven't yet trusted your life to Jesus, do it today – and come home to God. God cares about you and about how you respond to him personally.

If you have, then you have been shown the greatest kindness that we could ever imagine – the kindness of the God who cares about every person – who didn't even stop at sparing his own Son so that he could forgive us and bless us.

I hope as you continue to study Ruth over the coming weeks that you'll be encouraged to trust and keep trusting in the loving kindness of God in Jesus Christ.