

Good morning church! I'm Chris Martin, and I'm a pastor here, and it truly is my pleasure to open up God's Word with you this morning. And that's what we're going to do, so, if you've got your Bibles, and I hope you do, please open them up to Ruth chapter 1. That's where we're going to be. Ruth 1. We want every person to have a hand on their Bible, so if you don't have one, grab one of the hard-backed black one under every chair. You can open your phone or tablet. Ruth 1. If you open a black one from under your chair, Ruth 1 is on page 222.

For the next seven weeks we are going to be studying the Book of Ruth. Last time I preached I had the longest introduction ever, so this week...no introduction! Let's go! Ruth 1:1

[1] 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.

ⁱ Now, right off the bat we need to set the context, because it is of extreme importance. The text says that this takes place in the days when the judges ruled. And the theme verse of Judges is the last verse of the book of Judges: Judges 21:25, you can literally just look back one verse in your Bible, but it says: [25] In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. So, that's the context. There's no king...just do whatever the heck you want. And that leads to rape and murder and war and all kinds of messy stuff. This is a very sketchy moment in Israel's history, and the book of Ruth takes place right at the end of that season.

Now, it says there was a famine in the land of Bethlehem in Judah. Now, this may not seem like much to our reading eyes, but there's a couple of things to note here. First, a famine in the Old Testament was almost always seen as a sign of divine judgment. According to Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, if God's people would go after other gods and persist in rebelling against the Lord, he would respond by cutting off the rains and sending famine. So, famines are often God's hand of judgment.

But second, the fact that the famine was in the land of Bethlehem was ironic. Ironic because 'Bethlehem' means 'house of bread'. There's a famine in the house of bread. This is like: no food at the Costco. This is where there is supposed to be bread, and there is none. This kind of thing is not supposed to happen in a place like this.

And then it says that there's a man, his wife, and their two sons, and they head to find work in Moab. Now, that might seem all good and well, right? "No food in Bethlehem...there is food and work in Moab...let's move to Moab!" But there were a few problems with this plan. First, the Moabites' origin story can be found in Genesis 19. Lot, Abraham's nephew, is fleeing Sodom and Gomorrah after God blows that thing up, and ends up in a cave with his two daughters. And the girls realize that they won't be able to have children, so they come up with a scheme. They get Lot drunk and take turns with him. And this is what Genesis 19:36-37 says: [36] Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. [37] The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. So, these are the Moabites. The family trees from Moab were like a phone pole...you know what I'm saying?ⁱⁱ But even their ominous beginnings aren't all to consider, the Moabites are a thorn in Israel's flesh for centuries. The Moabites go to war against Israel. The Moabites are excluded from the assembly of the Lord. And the Moabites worship other gods. So, this whole setting is filled with problems. The time period is sketchy, there's a famine in a place where there shouldn't be, and this family moves to a very questionable location. Verse 2. [2] The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

Now, often in the Bible, names mean something. The names of the sons, Mahlon and Chilion, seem like Klingon names or something, but in the Hebrew they mean 'sick' and 'dying'. Good hearty names for twin boys if you're looking for names, right? Just name them Wheezy and Sneezy. That won't be a problem!ⁱⁱⁱ We'll get to Naomi later, but Elimelech means 'God is King'. Now, there is debate as to the motives of Elimelech in moving his family to Moab: were his motives honorable or sinful? Well, I'll just tell you my stance. I don't think he should have done it. See, I bet if we could ask Elimelech, "Hey bro, what are you doing? You know how ghetto Moab is! Yo, someone peed in that gene-pool!"

But I think he'd probably say, "Hey, I'm just trying to love my family by providing food and shelter."

Listen, opossums do that for their children. We might need to raise the bar on what it means to be a Godly man who loves and leads his family. It's more than just food and shelter. Men, you leading your home means more than just provision. You ARE to provide...But you are to protect, AND be the first pastor to your family. I'm not supposed to be your family's first pastor...you are. Now, that don't mean you need to know Systematic Theology, Greek, and Hebrew. But it does mean you are setting your family up for spiritual success. You see, Elimelech's name means 'God is King', but he doesn't live like it. Because when he looks around at his circumstances he thinks, "I have to take care of me and mine, so, I'm going to leave the place God brought us and move into Moab, away from the people of God." And listen to me: it's really hard to be away from the people of God and experience the blessing of God.^{iv}

Now, sometimes God calls us away from his people to go and spread the Gospel to unbelieving peoples. That's called Missions and that's what we talked about last week. But this is not that. It's nearly impossible to be away from the people of God and experience the blessing of God. This is just one of the reasons why you and your family need to make belonging to a church a top priority in your life. It's how you lead your family!

But this family moves to Moab, away from God, away from God's people, away from hard times, to avoid starvation...but things don't go so well. Verse 3. [3] But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. Some of the tragedy here is that in their attempt to avoid death and crisis in Bethlehem, they walked right into the clutches of the very thing they feared. Verse 4: [4] These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah Her name means 'opinionated talk-show mogul'...kidding. Orpah actually means 'stiff necked' and the name of the other Ruth. Now, Ruth's name is difficult to translate, but it most likely means 'friend' or 'refreshment'. So, one of them marries 'stiff necked' and one of them married 'refreshment'. Who would you rather have? It's why we named our daughter Harper Ruth, not Harper Orpah.

Now, these marriages must be interpreted in light of Old Testament prohibitions against marriage with people of other faiths, particularly Deuteronomy 7:3-4. [3] You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, [4] for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. And we can infer that God is not pleased with the taking of these wives because of the last line of verse 4: They lived there about ten years. Naomi's sons lived in their married state for ten years but without fathering any children. This would have been extremely unusual in these times. We are to understand that both women are 'coincidentally' barren. The barrenness of Ruth and Orpah must be interpreted as evidence of God's disapproval. But things get worse. Verse 5. [5] and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. So, 'sick' and 'dying' died? Hmm...didn't see that coming! But this is the final blow. When both sons die and leave their mother and their two Moabite

wives widowed, without any male heirs. And in those times this was much worse than it would be today. The death of a husband meant the loss of one's economic support base, a loss of family structures. Widowhood often meant inevitable alienation and destitution.

And it's right here that I'd like to make my first point: hardship can be brought on by yourself or by circumstances. You see, some of this was Elimelech's fault...and some of this was probably Naomi's fault...but some of it was not. Famine: not their fault. Leaving God's land to go to Moab: Elimelech's fault, not Naomi's. Elimelech dying: not their fault. Allowing the sons to marry pagan wives: probably Naomi's fault. Barren wives: not their fault. Sons dying: well, you name your son Jeeves, he might be a butler...but really, this isn't their fault. And listen, this is true for us as well! Some of our hardships are our own doing...and some just happen to us. But what do we do? What do we do when, from our perspective, God doesn't come through? When God doesn't heal your illness? When you feel hopeless? What happens when the doctor's report is terminal? What happens when you didn't get the job? What happens when your spouse leaves? What happens when you DID THE THING that you NEVER THOUGHT you would ever do and now you are left with the consequences? You see, hardship can be brought on by yourself or by circumstances, but WHAT do you do when THAT happens? Well, what happens next in Ruth is really important. Verse 6.

[6] 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. [7] So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

Now, Ruth is a very interesting book in that God is hardly mentioned. But his hand moving in seemingly small 'coincidences' is noticeable. There just happens to be a famine in the 'house of bread'...and the Moabite wives just happen to be barren...and now Naomi just happens to hear about God...just happening to provide his people with food...which will just happen to get them back to Bethlehem. OK? And we've talked about this before, but in the Bible, and specifically in the book of Ruth, we see the invisible hand of God's providence. This is the providential hand of God, guiding natural and historical events for the fulfillment of his purpose. And so, to our question: what do you do in response to hardships? Well, Naomi realizes that she needs to return to her people, to her home, and to her God. And this is the theme we'll see emerging in the rest of this text. Verse 8.

[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. [9] 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. [10] And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." [11] 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? [12] 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 night and should bear sons, [13] 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."

Now, what Naomi is doing here is releasing her daughters-in-law to remarry. The girls are like, "We want to go with you." She's like, "No, you can't. I have nothing for you. I have no job. I have no money. I have no life insurance. I have nothing. I haven't even been there in 10 years! I don't even know what's going to happen when I get there. Furthermore, my sons are dead, I don't have any other sons for you to marry. And I'm old, and even if I could have a child, would you wait for him to grow up to marry him? No, this isn't a good plan. Let's face it...this is over!" She's just laying down the reality of their situation. It's not good! But what's really interesting is her last words in verse 13.

Who does Naomi blame for this predicament? The hand of the Lord has gone out against me. Naomi's disposition toward her lot in life is exposed. She is hurt and becoming bitter towards God for her crisis. You ever been there? Where you believe your hardship isn't your fault...nor is it circumstantial...but you blame God? Naomi's there...and it's going to affect her. Look at verse 14: [14] Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

[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."

Now, Naomi's words here are troubling. For Orpah to go back to her people means that she has also gone back to her gods...back to her evil, pagan religion. The Moabites worshiped a false god called Chemosh. Chemosh was a god whose name meant 'destroyer' or 'subduer', and we find in the book of 2 Kings that human sacrifice was a part of the religious rites of worshiping Chemosh. Now, Naomi, this Jewish woman, is telling these women, who she loves, to join a pagan religion. She is the worst evangelist in the history of the world! Evangelism 101: don't send people to other religions. But really, church, Naomi's comment is troubling. Her theological perception at this point seems no better than many of the characters in the Book of Judges. Her argument is, "go back to your gods...mine isn't any better. You girls just need to go back to your Moabite homes, and marry some Moabite guys, and worship your Moabite gods, and have some little, pagan, Moabite children, and live a good life...of course, you'll end up dying and going to hell...but we won't worry about that right now." And listen, she's doing the exact same thing that Elimelech was doing earlier. "Things aren't going so well with my God...and I see a what seems like an easier way...sure, it's outside how God would want me to behave...sure, it's going to take you away from the people of God...sure, it's going to get you to actually worship false gods, but it seems the path of least resistance. It seems like the logical way. And, sadly, Orpah turns back. And we never hear about her again in the Bible.

Now let me ask you something: you ever do this? You say you believe in God...you come here to Fathom...you close your eyes...maybe you even lift your hands when we play a song you really like. Right? In whatever position you prefer: carry the TV, hold my baby, the Mufasa...if you're really into it you go for the goalposts or the heartburn. Right? You see, you can really get into all this stuff, and you feel the emotions of it all, but then, when it comes down to the choices you are making in your life, you are making the convenient, and temporary choices over and over and over.

See, when things get tough, you turn back, like Orpah. So, I'll make my second point of the morning. Yeah, hardship can be brought on by yourself or by circumstances. But in response to hardships, you can return to who you were. Naomi's doing just what Elimelech was doing. She's looking for the easy way...and I don't want to diminish how hard things are for her...but the temptation is to return to who you were. So Orpah goes back. But let's look at Ruth's response in verse 16. [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. [17] 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." [18] And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

Now, you may have heard this verse read at wedding ceremonies... and frankly I love this for weddings, but the more I spent time in the text and thinking about it, it's just kinda weird that we use this. This is a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. And then I thought...I am not saying these words to Royce, ok? But besides that...the words that Ruth says are really a great summary of what a conversion moment should be. Right? I'm going differently. I'm living differently. My people are changing. And my God is changing. This seems to be Ruth's conversion moment. And I think Ruth

models for us the last point I want to make this morning. In response to hardships, you can return to who you were or you can become who you are. You can return, or you can become. You can go back, or you can go forward. You can live in the old, or you can live in the new.

And there are examples of this all throughout the Bible. In John chapter 5 there is a story about a pool in Jerusalem, called Bethesda. And there was a myth that an angel would stir the water, and if you were sick, and you entered the pool while the angel was stirring the waters, you would be healed. So, in the story there is a man who has been paralyzed for 38 years. And he would lay on a mat near the pool, and for almost 4 decades he's just there, trying to figure out a way to get into that pool when the waters were stirred, with the hope that he would be healed. Well, Jesus shows up, in John 5:6-9 [6] When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" [7] The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me." [8] Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." [9] And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

Now, I don't know if you ever thought about this detail before, but do you ever wonder why Jesus told him to take up his mat? Why not just leave it? I mean, think about how nasty that thing must be. Ladies, you ever leave your yoga mat out in the trunk after some hot yoga or something? Yo, that thing gets ripe...fast! Well imagine 38 years on this thing. Gross! But my wager on why he tells him to take up his mat is that if he had left it there he would have been tempted to lay back down. In all that filth...in all that stink. And you think, "Why would anyone ever go back to that mat?" Why do you keep going back to that boyfriend or girlfriend who keeps cheating on you? Why do you keep drinking too much, even though you promised you were done? Why does pornography still call to you, even though you know it's the worst thing for you? Listen, the Apostle Paul, in Romans 7 acknowledges this when he says, for I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I think Jesus tells him to take up his mat so he wouldn't return to who he was, but rather so he'd become who he is.

In John 21, we get the story of Peter. Now, last we saw Peter, he had denied that he knew Christ three times. he abandoned and forsook his friend, his Rabbi, his savior. He'd let Jesus down. He'd failed. And what do we find in John 21? Look at verse 3: [3] Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. What was Peter's occupation before he started following Jesus? Yeah, he fished. He was supposed to be fishing for people...but in the reality of his failure, he returned right back to who he had been. But I love that they caught nothing. It's funny how when you go back to your old ways, you get NOTHING out of it!

And finally, in John 11 we read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus shows up after his buddy Lazarus dies, and he even waits a few days, just to make sure his body starts to stink a little bit. There was no doubt in anyone's mind, he brought that dude back from the dead. But a fascinating part of that story is in verse 43: [43] When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." [44] The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Unbind him, and let him go. Why? Cause he's alive now. Living people don't need to wear grave clothes. They stink, they're restrictive, they bind you up. That's the command to the dead guy who's made alive again. "Take off those grave clothes. That's not you who you are anymore."

Now, imagine if a couple weeks later you were at a dinner party with Jesus, and Lazarus showed up. And you're sitting down to eat, and Jesus says, "Hey, who's that mummy over there?"

And Laz is like, "It's me, boss!"

Jesus would be like, “Bro, what are you doing? What are you still in your grave clothes for? You’re ruining dinner. You still stink.”

And Laz is like, “Oh yeah, well, they’re comfortable.”

And that can be us, too! Do you see the point I’m making? In response to hardships, you can return to who you were, or you can become who you are. Listen to me, if you’re in Christ, here’s what has happened to you. You were dead in your sin. You were in the grave. You were on your mat, unable to get into the pool for healing. And at just the right time Jesus stepped into your life and he called you out. He called your name and he said, “Come out! Get up and walk!” And you went from death to life. And even though you were made alive, you were still all wrapped up in the clothes of your former deadness. And now he says, “It’s time to take those clothes off. That stuff doesn’t fit you anymore. That’s not who you are anymore. It’s time to pick up that mat. Don’t lay in that filth anymore! That’s not who you are!”

But I just know the temptation. Those old clothes were comfortable. The mat is a tempting place to return to. The comfort of fishing will beckon. Returning to who you were is a great temptation. But listen...You don’t have to do the things you used to do...because you aren’t the same person you used to be. So, what hardships are you experiencing right now. Are they self-inflicted? Or are you suffering because of someone else or some circumstances out of your control? Regardless of the cause, you get to determine where you run. Like Orpah, will it be back to who you were? What old clothes are you still wearing? What mat do you need to pick up? What old way of life do you need to abandon? I want you to hear me today: if you are in Christ...you are not who you used to be. And you, through the power of God’s Spirit in you, can receive the courage that Ruth had, to become to who you are.

Let’s pray.

ⁱ Most of the textual work adapted from Daniel Block, The New American Commentary: Judges, Ruth.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Joby Martin’s sermon ‘The Sovereignty of God in Pain’

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from J.D. Greear’s sermon ‘Hope in the Dark’

^{iv} Adapted from Joby Martin’s sermon ‘The Sovereignty of God in Pain’

^v https://www.reddit.com/r/dankchristianmemes/comments/5xoi92/worship_positions/