

The Real World Hurts

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the book of Ruth, chapter 1, verse 1. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem and Judah went to soldier in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.

I don't suppose there is anyone here today who is not familiar, at least with the outline of the book of Ruth.

It may be that everyone is familiar with the minute detail of this book. It may be a small book, but it contains a big story.

It is but one of two books in the Bible that are named after women. The other is the book of Esther, and you may find parallels and contrasts between those two books.

The book of Esther tells of a woman, a queen, or a woman of poverty, and she married a king.

[1 : 37] The other tells us of a Jewish woman, of a gentile woman rather who came to marry a Jewish man.

The book of Ruth begins with a famine. The book of Esther begins with a feast.

Both books are connected with the same theme, the presentation, the preservation rather of God's people in a hostile world.

I cannot tell you who the author of this little book is. I don't know. I'm happy to accept that behind the storyteller is the sovereign God, who is in overall control of the events that are outlined for us in this book that bears the name of Ruth.

Because ultimately the book is not so much about Ruth, but about God. It's not about romance, or about people who experience trials, sorrows, personal tragedies, devotions, or their joy.

[3 : 03] All of these strands are included in the story, but it is about God, and about God's purpose, and about how God's purpose is outworked and fulfilled in the world.

So the book is essentially about the love of God. We find in the New Testament how God's love is summarized. God so loved the world that he gave his only son, whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Well, I'd like to focus on just three thoughts from this passage today. First of all, the setting of the story.

Secondly, the steps taken by one family. And thirdly, the solemn outcome of such steps.

The setting of the story. First we ought to ask the question, first, why is this book, why is it placed in the Bible?

[4 : 18] And the reason I ask that question is you will not find any supernatural happenings, for example, like miracles outlined in this book.

There is on a first reading of the book, there is, as it were, nothing out of the ordinary about the events that take place in this little book.

It is so mundane. And I think that is part of the attraction of the book. For the promises of God are not applicable to great unusual occurrences, but they are applicable to the everyday events of life.

And that is, this book shows us everyday events taking place. The book teaches us, that is, the readership, that although much of the divine planning may be hidden from those who are the main characters, if you like, in the book, we are invited to look behind.

That is taking place to the main characters who are spoken of in the book, to see the sovereign hand of God at work in the lives of those characters.

[5 : 42] See a sovereign hand at work in his goodness and in his grace as the story unfolds. So it is not about, as I said, a certain family who experience trials suffering un-believement.

It is not even a story about those who came to enjoy happiness. All of these threads or strands are intertwined in the story.

But underneath we are meant to understand, it is about the purpose of God, the love of God which like a golden thread runs right through the whole of the Bible.

Now, when you go to the end of this book you will find verses that confid them, how God's purpose has been outwitted.

Because at the end of this book you find Peres, now, and you may think, what's the point in reading verses like that? Peres fathered Hesram, Hesram fathered Ram, Ram fathered Aminadab, Aminadab fathered Nashon, Nashon fathered Salman, Salman fathered Boas, Boas fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

[7 : 03] You have a list of different generations. And then you go to the New Testament, on the very first chapter in the New Testament, in Matthew's Gospel you find these words, Judah the father of Peres, Zeirah and Zeirah by Tehmer, Peres the father of Hesram and so on.

And you find Boas the father of Obed by Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, Jesse the father of David the king. And what does that tell us?

It tells us, not just about the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ, but it tells us of the wide variety of people, both Jew and Gentile, who form the humanity of Christ.

Because the humanity of Christ is taken from many strands, brought together. The very humanity that is prepared by God for the Son.

You find this in the New Testament, in the Book of Heb, in the letter to the He, consequently when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.

[8 : 16] In other words, you have prepared my humanity. And Christ's humanity is brought from all these different strands and different peoples.

And that is significant. Now, some of you, maybe many of you are familiar with seeing a tweed in a loom.

All the threads that make up a tweed. And if you are unfamiliar with weaving, you might say to yourself, how on earth can all these threads be brought together to form a pattern in a cloth or in a tweed?

But you see as the weaver plies the shuttle, and as it goes backwards and forwards, and sometimes you cannot even follow its movement, it is so quick from one side to the other.

You see the pattern developing, and you see how the threads are being worked together.

[9 : 26] Well that is something like this book. You have to go behind what you read to discover how the threads in the story of this book, how they are being woven into a pattern by God, so that his marvellous purpose is being outworked.

The story is set in the times or the days of the judges, when the judges ruled. And that was not the most prosperous spiritual period in the life of the people of Israel.

It was a period of spiritual declension, a period when there was national lack of unity, a period when as peoples they suffered at the hands of other nations, a period as we read today in the first verse of Ovedinem, the last verse of the book of Judges, in those days.

There was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in his own eyes. And that is surely an indication of the total confusion that prevailed, and the utter disregard for the teaching of the word of God.

You may say to me, but they didn't have the word of God, oh, but they did. They had the books of Moses. And you see, that is the setting in which this little book is set.

[11 : 16] When everyone did what was right in his own eyes, you might ask, did they have not a means of guidance? Of course they did. But they weren't interested in the words of truth.

They had the books of Moses, as I said. So they were without excuse.

You know, we might ask ourselves today, what is our means of guidance? Many will tell you that their conscience is their means of guidance.

My conscience would not permit me, you'll hear people say, to do this or that. Every time I hear that, I say, really?

Really? Because your conscience, let me put it bluntly, your conscience will permit you, whatever you tell it.

[12 : 13] No matter how it might seek to witness against you, you will be able to suppress it. There is only one sure rule of guidance or direction.

You remember how in the Shodder Catechism, the question is asked, question number two, what rule is God given to direct us, how we may glorify and enjoy him? The word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy.

The only rule, not just one rule among many, but the word of God is the only rule.

So that we don't do what seems right in our own eyes, but that we do what is right in the eyes of God.

And so it is evident from our reading of the book of Judges, that there were many times during the days of the Judges when God and His truth was ignored.

[13 : 23] And then there will be a time when they would come back to God, and then they would go astray again. And they have accounted for their own day, but we have to account for our day.

And the sad truth is that by and large has a nation today. We too have rejected the teachings of the word of God. And that is, I believe, cause for deep sadness and cause for wrestling in prayer.

For we too will have to account for how we have used and refused the word of God. This book then begins, we are told, in the days when the Judges ruled.

We have no precise details as to the year when this decision was taken, just that it was during that period.

That's a setting then of the story. Secondly the steps taken by this one family. At the time of which the author writes there was a famine in the land.

[14 : 45] Famine did not just mean that they experienced austerity to quote a current phrase that is in vogue in political circles at any rate.

Thamen meant more than just financial hardship, it would cause social hardship as well.

Remember this was mainly an agrarian economy. So Thamen would affect that whole way of life.

They were dependent on crops growing, on livestock having grazings. We are not told the cause of the famine.

Whether there was drought, lack of water or whether vegetation was destroyed in other ways. We don't know why there was crop failure, why there was famine.

[15 : 42] We may specialise but the writer doesn't consider that as important. However we know from other parts of the Bible what kind of picture may be depicted from times like this where the fig tree should not blossom, not fruit be on the vines.

The produce of the olive fail and fields yield no food. The flock be cut off from the field and there be no herd in the stalls. In other words a picture of total desolation in the land.

That's the kind of imagery you could associate with famine. But I'm not all to gather sure in my own mind that we are meant to understand the terror and famine just to mean something that has affected the lack of growth, the lack of vegetation.

It may be that we are meant to understand something else. Because it could refer not just to the physical natural famine but to spiritual famine.

And I'm rather inclined in my own mind to a two way understanding of the terror and famine. I say that because of what I read in the prophecy of Amos.

[17 : 14] Behold the days that come in declares the Lord God when I will send a famine on the land not a famine of bread, not a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the word of the Lord.

And so when you read in the beginning of this book there was a famine in the land. In my view the famine is not just merely something that extends to the lack of growth with regard to devastation in vegetation.

But that it refers to a lack of hearing of the word of God. And that the famine is meant to be understood in two ways.

For given the waywardness of the people during the days of the judges it seems to me perfectly logical to conclude that there was a famine on two levels.

The cultural, the agricultural, physical and the spiritual. Through the use of famine God is calling loudly to these people to return to their God.

[18 : 38] C.S. Lewis makes the observation and he uses a phrase the megaphone of God.

This is in the days before PA systems were so sophisticated and when people wanted a loud hail to call the attention of people.

And the megaphone in Lewis's view was to rouse people to their need of God and calling them to return to God.

And this is how he expressed it. God whispers to us in our pleasures. He speaks in our conscience.

But he shouts in our pains. He uses megaphone to rouse a death word. He shouts in our pains.

[19 : 37] Now you cannot but associate much pain and much suffering with famine at a natural level. And yet famine if you read the book of Deuteronomy chapter 28 you will discover there that famine occurs because of disobedience on the part of those who are being taught by God.

Famine can make life extremely difficult and famine would appear to be the final straw for this family in taking this step, turning their back on the promised land and setting out for the country of Moab.

Notice the distinction the writer makes between land and country. The land of Judah but the country of Moab.

A man of Bethlehem he says and Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab. A man went to sojourn.

How we meant to understand that this was the only family that took this step or were there others too who made this decision?

[21 : 00] At other times in history we know that many families took the decision to move at times of hardship even in our own island here when people moved out in the 1920s and they emigrated to other countries.

Is that why it is written here, a man? You know it's difficult to know for sure. But given the little knowledge that I possess of human nature and the pattern we see even in our own day of economic migrants desperate to get to this country, put in their lives in danger to cross the channel to better themselves having traveled many miles through the continent of Europe since they left their own country and using these little inflatable dinghies to try and cross the channel to get to this country.

So it's not impossible to think that others might have taken the same step. But I think we are meant to be more than a little surprised by the information that is given by the narrator of the story, a man of Bethlehem going to the country of Moab.

Why do I say that? Well if only for this reason the name Bethlehem literally means the house of bread.

This man belonged to the area that was literally the bread basket of Judah and that of itself tells you something of the cloud of gloom that hung over this area.

[22 : 52] At about 50 miles across the Dead Sea in the country of Moab there was no famine. And so we are told a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to Sojourn in the country of Moab.

And the word to Sojourn tells us a little I believe about the intentions of this man.

He did not intend to dig up permanent residents in Moab. He went to Sojourn, in other words he went just for a temporary period, at least that's what he thought.

He will go there until the worst is passed. And you could argue, and you could argue with passion, could not, would not any devoted father make the same decision for the benefit of his wife and family?

How can this choice be so bad? Surely no one would find fault with his motives for going to the country of Moab where there was food and plenty.

[24 : 01] Well maybe none of his fellow citizens did find fault with the motivation that persuaded this man to leave the land of Judah.

But you see ultimately this man was not accountable to his fellow men, but accountable to God as we all are for the choices that we make in life.

His choice I believe cost him his life and that of his two sons. Now as I said you could make a case for why he moved and you could argue with perhaps a measure of justification on our part, but remember he was leaving the country the land of promise.

He was leaving the land where God had promised to meet with his people and he was going to the country of idolatry.

So however we might try to justify the decision that he made, it ran counter to the teaching of the word of God.

[25 : 10] And that is how sin presents itself to our mind and to our heart. Sin is so deceptive and it comes to us and it seems to be the reasonable thing to do.

Until we discover the cost, the painful cost of falling headlong into sin.

Here is a man who is guided by his own wisdom rather than the wisdom that comes from above. No doubt he comforted himself with a thought, but I'll soon return.

It'll only be a short period. Well my friend is a true of you, that you have turned your back on the promises of God and you're saying to yourself it'll only be for a little while.

Until I'm able to do this or that and then I'll turn back to God. We can be faced with many temptations in life and perhaps saying to ourselves it's only for a short period of time and then I'll begin to follow the Lord.

[26 : 30] I know what I'm doing is wrong, but then I'll turn when I've done this other than the next thing, all how easy it is to make such promises to ourselves as we're sucked into strain from the path that God calls us to follow.

We become blinded by the so-called pleasures of sin and by our own planning. My friend is not you today.

Are you like this man? Listening to your own thoughts rather than what God is saying to you.

I will travel this road for the present because it is right and my own eyes says this man, like many of his generation, I'll wait until I'm satisfied then I'll return.

Oh, how dangerous it is to trifle with sin. It's much stronger than me or you.

[27 : 51] It will tie us up in no time. The Psalmist on one occasion speaking of his own experience states, the power of sin, my iniquities have overtaken me.

I cannot see. They are blinded. They are more than the hairs of my head. My heart fails me. Paul speaks even in a state of grace. I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my memory.

Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? So in the famine God was calling Israel back to himself, elimely rather than looking at matters from a biblical point of view.

He rested on his own analysis of the situation. He considered he had found the answer to the difficulties that confronted them.

Or getting out of the famine. May have put bread on the table, but it didn't deal with the spiritual problems.

[29 : 04] Yes, he could justify his actions no doubt. Now the writer gives us the names of the members of this family.

The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife Naomi, the names of his two sons Melon and Achillion. It's as if the writer wishes us to know without any doubt who were the members of this family.

He doesn't just leave it as a man. Of Bethlehem and Judah went to the country of Moab. He gives us detailed information about their names.

They were Hebrews. They were the legitimate offspring of Abraham as to the flesh. But you see that of itself was not enough.

We may have the privilege of hearing the Gospel, but without accepting the message of the Gospel by faith and Christ alone. It's not enough.

[30 : 10] It's not enough for salvation. We may hear it. It's not enough for salvation. We may grow up in a home where we had the privilege of being taught the word of God.

But it's not enough. When you look at the names here, Naomi means pleasant. Melon means unwell, pale and sickly.

Achillion weak and free. And you may well ask, what was it that possessed Elimelech to move his family given the state of their health?

And Elimelech would probably have responded where he heard today, that's just why I moved to Moab on account of their ill health.

Maybe their health will improve. Their names may even be an indication of how much of a struggle life had been for this family.

[31 : 12] But it is the name Elimelech that is most significant, I believe, because it means my God is king. And you could say there's a certain irony here.

Given the times that are spoken of, what times are spoken of here? Days. There was no king in Israel. Elimelech did what was right in his own eyes, and yet the name of this man is my God is king.

Here is a man whose parents gave him this very significant name, with the meaning my God is king. Yet the story appears to indicate that he did not live up to his name.

And what I feel is even more significant, every section of this book makes mention of the Lord, except this introductory section.

It's worth reflecting on that. There is not the least indication given in this section of the book that he comes before God in prayer, that he acknowledges the Lord has been on the throne of his life.

[32 : 26] And you might say of this man what was said of the church in Sardis, you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. There's nothing wrong with the name, in and of itself.

But he doesn't seem to live up to the meaning of the name. He is suppressing the voice of the king of kings in the steps he takes. You know we can have the name of being born into a Christian family or into a Christian community, and not acknowledge the Lord to be king by serving him in our lives.

The steps then taken by this one family, the setting of the story, the solemn outcome of such steps. For this man, his brief sojourn in the country of Moab ends in death on Tisbeah.

His sons marry women from Moab, and you could say roots are put down only for them to be abruptly uprooted for within ten years.

Not only did Elimelech die, but his two sons also die. We're not told what caused their deaths or what age they were, but the impression you get is that their deaths were directly as a result of the steps taken to settle in Moab.

[34 : 03] So you see, going to sojourn in the country of Moab had far greater consequences than they ever foresaw. The day they left Bethlehem behind.

Both sons were still young men when they died, because we know the wife of one had a family later on. So the apostle James reminds us, each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

Men decide when it is conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Going to sojourn in the country of Moab resulted in taking them into the far country like the prodigal spoken of in the New Testament, further and further away from God.

Let me ask you today, friend, are you following a similar path away from God?

[35 : 18] And so it was a sore providence for the sole survivor of this family that had left Bethlehem with such great aspirations.

Her heart come out but go out in compassion to this woman Naomi. She is set before us as a lonely figure, a pathetic figure, a stranger in another country.

A woman was left without her two sons and a husband. Can you feel the pain in that cryptic few words?

I think the writer means us to feel her pain, left without her husband under two sons. She had stood at three graves in Moab.

Her life totally devastated by the sore providence that she experiences. And if you could speak to her and say to her, ah, but God has a good purpose in all of this, I'm not sure that you would get much of a hearing from Naomi at that point in her life.

[36 : 36] You know, sometimes in attempting to be sensitive we can be so insensitive, can't we? We can be so lacking in understanding of the pain of our fellow beings in life.

And you know what, such times of deep pain, such times of grievous desolation, we may have even exacerbated it.

You could have said to Naomi, ah, but you have got your two daughters-in-law to comfort you. But her daughters-in-law weren't a husband under two sons.

They weren't her flesh and blood. And perhaps also we have said, and we've been well-meaning when we said it, we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good to those who are called according to His purpose.

It's a precious, precious part of the Word of God. But at that moment I'm not sure it would have been the right thing to say to this grieving woman.

[37 : 55] Yes, God works all things together, all things, disobedience, sin, the steps of Elimelech, the tragic death of Elimelech, and the two sons.

The destitution of Naomi, darkandles, God works the darkest, soarest, ugliest, most shameful, most painful trials together for good.

And we may find it difficult to accept that. But that is indeed the difficult but hopeful message of Romans 8.

And of these verses in Romans 1, 1-5. It's not a greeting card, platitude. As someone has put it, it's a gritty declaration of fact for the real world hurts.

The real world hurts. And that's what you're faced with here. The tragedy in Elimelech's home, you see, ensured, or it was part of the purples, that the Messiah would be born from unrooted would be one of the ancestors of Messiah.

[39 : 33] And one day God himself would be submerged into the darkest pit of loss and sorrow and pain in human nature and cry out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

You see, though sin often ensnares us by subtle steps, praise God that he often works by hard providences, and the great proof and demonstration in the cross of his son, the hardest providence of them all, by which salvation has been secured for undeserving sinners like you and me.

The setting of the story and the day of judges, the steps taken by the family, leaving the land of promise, going into an idolatrous country, the solemn outcome of such steps, death, burial, desolation, grief, sorrow and loss, all to teach us to look to the Christ who came out of these steps to be the Savior of sinners.

Let us pray. O eternal God, there is so much in providence of which we are so objectively ignorant, so many things that we don't understand, so many threats, which we don't see a pattern, but we bless thy name, that you have a pattern, that you have a purpose in view, and that your purpose will be most gloriously outward.

Help us today to look to the Christ who came into this life as the hope of salvation, that our lives may be bound up with his and the glory shall be thine in Jesus' name. We ask it. Amen.

[41 : 55] Let us conclude by singing to God's praise from the second verse of Psalm 145. Second verse of Psalm 145 verse 15, the eyes of all things, Lord attend, and on the way that here to live, thou in season due, descend sufficient food them to relieve.

Yea, thou thine hand does open wide, everything does satisfy that lives, and doth on earth abide of thy great liberality.

The Lord is just in his ways all, and holy in his works each one, he is near to all that un-un-call, who call in truth on him alone.

God will the just desire fulfill, such as do him fear and dread, that cry regard, and hear he will, and save them in the time of need. Four verses.

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Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit rest on and abide with you all. Now and forever. Amen.