

Ruth 1

Intro

How do you feel about the book of Ruth?

It's a funny one isn't it? It's not quite Marmite- I don't think people love it or hate it- but maybe love it or don't quite know what to make of it.

My guess would be that if you're particularly sensitive to characters in literature then you might well get a lot out of Ruth at first reading. If you're more like me and you key in more to plot and narrative it could easily pass you by a bit. After all what really happens in the book? It's been described as a romantic comedy- is that all that it is? Where does it fit into salvation history? Where are the great events, God's hand at work to save or judge? Sure, people refer to God throughout the book, but aside from two verses we're not really told specifically that He's doing anything. Admittedly in the book of Esther God's got a much lower profile, but even there we see him achieve far greater things don't we? A people saved by the self-sacrificial queen. Ruth is a book of little people, in pretty mundane life.

What are we supposed to make of it? Well I think it is much more than just a nice little moral story, or a piece of culturally specific wisdom literature. The clue is in the structure of the book, particularly the first and last few verses. Look at Ruth 1v1... "In the days when the judges ruled". Do you remember those days? Israel has been led out of Egypt, brought through the Red Sea and the Desert, and a whole generation had died along the way. They've been figuratively ransomed and purified, and led into the Promised Land, into God's rest. They're ready to be God's people, in his land under his rule, to be the blessing for the whole earth, to see the promises to Abraham fulfilled.

But it hasn't worked, even God's mighty acts haven't dealt with the hidden, but central problem- their rebellious hearts thwart God's promises, and the good, perfect Law He's given them only serves to highlight their wickedness. The time of the judges is characterised by an unbreakable downwards spiral away from God's blessings- rebellion, punishment, repentance, rebellion, punishment, repentance. Judges finishes with that damning comment- "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit."

So in the time of the Judges, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, and perhaps our ears prick up a bit and we think "hold on isn't that the line that God's promises were to be passed down through?" And this guy is called Elimelek, which means "God is king", it sounds promising... but what we see next is awful- it's the chaotic time of the judges, and there's such bad famine that this man of Judah reckons to be better off by leaving the Promised land altogether... going to the enemy, going to Moab. His name is "God is King", but in the little mini genealogy we see anything but that- it's a descent into

obscurity- his sons are named “sickness” and “failing”, and within ten years they’re dead, and the line of “God is King” is finished, cut short, outside of the Promised Land.

I think the reader’s meant to be asking: what is this? is this the complete failure of God’s blessings?

Well at the risk of giving out spoilers just jump ahead with me to the end of chapter 4 and we’ll steal the punch line... Ruth starts with a sort of downwards genealogy- Elimelek, Mahlon, Kilion, nothing. It ends with a lift back up- Ruth 4:18-22

Somewhere in between these two passages God has broken the cycle of despair from the time of the judges. Elimelek’s name was at risk of being cut off from Israel, but by the end of the book his family has been redeemed by Boaz, and his line has been carried on in Ruth’s children, and Israel has been set back on a path towards God’s King, David, and even more if we look at it through the lens of Matthew chapter 1, where he quotes and expands that genealogy we see this path leading on to Jesus.

Big Idea of book.

So great things are accomplished in Ruth, but the way God does that is not with massive events on the grand scale. He works it out with immense, gentle kindness in the lives of two more or less destitute women, and a more or less past it old man. This is a book about a God who rules not just on the world stage, but is also subtly sovereign in humdrum, everyday lives, and yet he somehow knits those two scales together as in his kindness he shepherds his people towards his rest.

It’s also about God’s people going away and coming back- that’s a key theme throughout the book, but especially here in chapter one, where the words for return or repent come out again and again to describe what’s going on. We’re going to focus on that stuff now.

Ruth 1- where do you go when God’s blessings fail?

So have a look at Chapter 1 again, it looks at two women in distinct but equally difficult situations. First up we’ve got Naomi, in many ways she’s the main character of the book, although she’s really used to give the context to Ruth’s story.

So Naomi and her family were in Israel, but because of drought or war or some other event the crops have failed... God’s land, it seems, isn’t going to provide for them so mimicking some of their forebears, like Abraham, they’ve left the Promised Land- they’ve upped sticks and emigrated to Moab.

They’ve settled and raised their boys and married them off. But... first Elimelek dies, and then her two sons, and Naomi’s left essentially destitute, cut off from Israel geographically, with her line cut short, and so her part in God’s promises has been... erased.

The author doesn't make a big point of whether she's done a particular wrong or not- the structure of verses 1-5 suggests disapproval- leaving Israel to find food, sounds fair enough... but shouldn't you know to rely on God? Marrying your sons to Moabites, well ok it might not have been strictly against the law, but at the very least it's questionable... Moabites were excluded from the Assembly of Israel, they could never be full members of the people. But maybe these weren't Naomi's decisions, we don't know. There's no direct criticism of her, so I don't think we're supposed to look at Naomi as someone who's been particularly sinful, but rather as a normal person, no worse than the rest of us. Someone who was full of God's blessing, but has been completely emptied out... and to cap it all look at verse 6, God goes and saves the people back home after doing so little for her. You can see how Naomi might have felt that this was like a final slap in the face.

Naomi's summary of chapter 1 is obviously in verses 20-21, the Almighty has made my life very bitter, I was full, but the Lord has made me empty, I'm not pleasant any more- the Lord has testified against me, and the Lord brought misfortune on me.

She's not wrong is she? You can see her thinking "God, did it really need to be this hard?" I'm back in God's place with his people, but there are no blessings. What was pleasant has become bitter. What was full has been made empty. God's sovereignty has been demonstrated, I've repented, I've returned, he's brought me home, but where's this good provision God's supposed to have? What do I do now that God's blessings have failed me so completely?

And then we've got Ruth- she's departed from her family to marry a foreigner, so to some extent she's already separated from her home culture. She's left her gods behind to hold to her husband's weird foreign God, verses 16 and 17 make it clear that hers is a heartfelt conversion, not just one of convenience. But what does she get for it? She's widowed, and now her mother in law is planning to head home to a culture where Ruth would be an outsider, an alien. Worse- one of the old enemy. She would be unable to buy land and look out for herself, very unlikely to be able to find a new husband and family. Where is God's rest for her? For this convert?

In verse 8 Naomi makes a generous suggestion to Ruth and Orpah, she uses the same "go back", "return", "repent" language that is used about Naomi repenting and returning to Israel. It's as if she's giving them the chance to decide they've made a duff choice, and set it straight.

She says "Girls repent to your people and your gods, go back, you may be better off with them than with me. May the Lord show you kindness, may he give you rest there, I can't guarantee that you'll get it with me".

Orpah is set against Ruth as a comparison: she takes the invitation and heads home, and again we're not given any particular moral comment- it's not really clear that she's done

anything wrong, she's been as good to Naomi as could be expected. After all, what can you do when you're left in such a desperate situation? When despite the virtues of their kindness the blessings of this God that they've married into have dried up- don't you have to make your own way?

Summary of their responses/answers

Of course the problem with just dealing with chapter 1 is that you don't see the full picture yet, you don't get to see the full solution, and that's very true to life. If you're a visitor let me say that this series we're starting in Ruth is a sort of interlude half way through the book of Job, and we've been seeing plenty of holes in all the easy answers to suffering. I'll try not to give any glib responses as if actually life is easy if your faith's straight. It's not, and Naomi's bitterness and loss are real, and reasonable, she's lost everything. Ruth is following her into a foreign land, with the expectation of a life in poverty, and we see hints in chapter two that she's in genuine danger of ill treatment and molestation.

God's blessings are going to reach them, but they do come at the end of some tough times.

We just get the hint of it this week in verse 22... they get home just at the beginning of harvest, we're just about to begin to see the fruit of God's work, but actually the seeds of his blessing have already been sown.

Naomi-

For Naomi the seed of the blessing has been there for some time, although perhaps she doesn't recognise it. She thinks she's empty and childless, and she completely overlooks and fails to appreciate that she's got Ruth with her, who in her kindness, which goes so far beyond the ordinary requirements of family, in her faithful, loving, holding to their family relationship is better than seven sons.

Or again, Naomi sees the bitterness of her life, and she correctly ascribes it to God, he's brought it on her. But what she might see as punishment, rebuke, or even vindictiveness, by the end of the book we're going to see as perhaps discipline, or perhaps readying her, and definitely as the first step towards God's gracious plan to unleash blessings she does not deserve.

If God had withheld his hand, and not brought bitterness upon her... well she would have died in a foreign land, maybe there would have been further descendants, but the sense of time in the introduction, the ten years passed, maybe indicate a lack of fertility, especially contrasted with chapter 4 verse 13

No, if God had withheld his hand Naomi would have been essentially empty and cut off from Israel's promises. As it is, by the end of Ruth we see her redeemed and provided for by the

faithful, kind Boaz, and we see the empty woman made more full than she could have imagined... all because God humbled her and brought her home in disgrace.

Again I don't want to make it sound easy, Naomi's return home was clearly an act of faith- she sees from afar how the Lord keeps coming to the aid of his foolish, rebellious people, and in penitence she returns to Him, and trusts Him to do the same for her.

She returns to God even though that was probably personally costly- she is uprooted again, she goes home and has to face the gossip of the town in verse 19, that can't have been easy- and all this without any clear end in sight- she knows there's no obvious rest for her... no chance of another husband or sons.

What does Naomi do when God's blessings fail, when his hand is against her? She repents, returns, and depends on the Lord. She clearly can't see how it'll work, but she knows His sovereign kindness and faithfulness are somehow reliable. Sure she cries out in bitterness, but at the same time we see in verses 8 and 9, or in chapter 2 verse 20, that she still expects God to act justly and rightly in blessing his people.

Over the next few weeks we'll see that hope more than fulfilled. Naomi's trajectory through the book takes us from emptiness to fullness, and shows God's steadfast kindness and readiness to provide for his people, even far beyond his covenant obligation. What do you do when God's blessings fail? You return to Him, you cling to Him, and although in all likelihood it'll continue to be tough, He will provide.

Ruth-

For Ruth as well the seeds of the blessing have already been sowed. I think the author has Naomi say it almost unconsciously in verses 8-9, "may the Lord show you kindness as you have shown kindness to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant you rest with another husband."

We don't know what happens to Orpah, who has shown some kindness and then heads home, but we'll see Ruth richly rewarded. Her virtue is presented as not just fulfilling her obligation to her mother in law, but having a kindness and commitment which stretches beyond the obligations. That's what she gets commended for later on, and it's the same virtue that Boaz, Naomi, and then God each model. A committed kindness that exceeds duty.

Ruth carries on being steadfast in her love for her adopted family, in verse 16 and 17 we get a sense of her complete commitment, not just to Naomi, but to her adoptive God. I think that's there to indicate that she takes God seriously, this isn't just friendship or a family requirement. She has committed herself to be one of God's people, and in doing so to love them and cling to them.

Ruth's trajectory through the book takes her from a widowed foreigner to the mother of David's line, and openly compared to the great women of Israel... it charts God's abundant blessings being poured out to those who have no right to know him, and bring nothing to the table except their fruitful faith.

What do you do when like Ruth you're coming to God's table with nothing really to show for yourself? Ruth has no status as an Israelite so that she would inherit his blessing and inherently deserve a place at the table, she has no riches or military strength or great deeds to her name, there's no sign that she's hugely talented. She's not a great bible teacher or the mighty evangelist, or the passionate leader.

But in Isaiah 1 God pours scorn on the big visible acts of religion, and says "The multitude of your sacrifices- what are they to me?" ... then a bit later "your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."

Or in James chapter 1 we read "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Ruth's got that in spades hasn't she?

The virtue that God seems to be pleased with is that when she could look out for number one and head home with Orpah, instead she takes the costly route of loving Naomi and going to work and provide for her. And isn't it glorious to see how his grace in accepting her trumps the law which would exclude her from Israel as a Moabite?

What do you do when you come to God with nothing in your own right, as a sinner who should be excluded from his promises, with no clear blessing ahead of you? Like Ruth cling to Him, and cling to his people, and in his grace he will not fail to gather you in.

Application-

when do God's blessings fail us?

What about us? It's very easy to point out that the God of the Bible is unfailingly faithful to his promises, but the honest reality is that we don't always keep the big picture in mind, we can't... and we're particularly prone to losing sight of it when life gets difficult. Naomi loses her husband and both her children, and she doesn't just say "alright God's got in control, nothing to worry about, praise him, it'll be ok"... that would be inhuman faith, questionable and callous. Naomi cries out in sorrow and bitterness, and Christians likewise will feel the pain of a life which is beyond our control.

What brings you to that difficult place? What makes you question or doubt the fullness or the goodness of the provision for you? Perhaps just a general dissatisfaction with the progress of life- this is not where I saw myself ten years ago, where's the career, or the family, come on God? Maybe a frustration with your spiritual life- why is it so hard to keep God in mind, and so easy to slip away? "I feel no more grown than I was when I was a new Christian, less so in some ways!" Are you stuck in a church of imperfect people, who can't really meet your needs, whose vision seems at odds with your own? Maybe none of those resonate with you, maybe other things do, but do God's blessings seem to fail you? How do we respond?

No doubt, like Naomi, maybe less extreme, many of us will have experienced sharper disillusionment with God's promises- that abrupt crumbling of what we'd hoped for or taken rest in- and probably most of us have got shocks yet to come. It could be the death of someone close to us, or a prolonged period of ill health for us or a friend, or ongoing financial trouble which comes to constantly dominate your thinking. Or the failure of human relationships, family strife, or deeply stressful work. Or, as I found a few years ago, was it just the closing of a door- an opportunity or blessing that you've stacked all your hope in being finally, unequivocally denied.

When we run into some of those things it would almost make sense to conclude that either that God doesn't exist, or that He does, but doesn't love me. What else can we do when God's blessings fail us completely?

What brings Naomi back isn't the empty, big picture, simple answer that "God is in control, it's going to be alright", or "look it's rubbish now, but heaven's going to be great"... perhaps many years later she could look back and appreciate some of that, but in the thick of it, in amongst her grief and struggle those ideas probably raised more questions than they dealt with.

What brings Naomi back is just that she looks and sees in verse 6 that the Lord comes to the aid of his people. Hers is a God who saves, though she's got no idea of how that's going to work.

Let me encourage you to dwell on that idea. If times are good then dwell on it now so that you remember it and see it again later when things feel desperate. Or if right now you feel that God's blessings for you are pretty incomplete, that he doesn't have your best interests at heart, remember what God is like, dwell on his character. Ours is a God who saves. That is literally what the name Jesus means. In 1 Peter the apostle writes to the scattered, persecuted, hurting church, and the very first thing he wants them to remember is that even before all their hardship God has chosen them, and sprinkled them with his blood. God saves, he has saved them, and he will continue to come to the aid of his people.

Naomi gets that, she doesn't have the answers to "how?", or "when?", or "why is it so tough?", but she sees enough of the character of God that she returns to him, and clings to him.

Ours is a God who comes to the aid of his people.

how to cling to God and his people?

What about Ruth, what can we learn from her in this passage? Well if you are a Christian then obviously there are very strong parallels. Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabite, by law and birth she is obnoxious to God, and she really brings nothing to the table. In honesty, when we reflect on our hearts, our thought life, our actions, we have to admit that we are equally unimpressive. What great skills and gifts do I need to develop so that God would need me in my own right? I've got nothing to offer.

But it's the grace of God that he takes the weak and the valueless like Ruth, or you or me, and he grafts them into the vine of Jesus. And nourished by Jesus they can bear fruit. Ruth shows that wonderfully, accepted as a foreigner into an Israelite family, and she shows such kindness, such godly character, such fruits of the Spirit, that by the end of the book everyone who sees it praises God.

How can I aspire to live and be fruitful as a Christian? How can I hope to demonstrate Jesus? Where should I direct my energies? Which ministry should I end up leading to great success? Well if like Ruth you've been accepted into God's people, then your calling is to cling to them, care for them, love them, provide for them... direct your gifts into that, and let that be the context for ministry... because that's what God is looking for in his people, that's the religion that he considers pure and faultless... shoring up the weak, loving each other as we struggle.

Obviously homegroups are ideal settings for that, they give time and space to deepen relationships and for us to see the support that's needed, and also feel close enough to accept loving kindness. But why not also see if you can invest time in regularly meeting up with someone to pray and study the bible. Take the time to hang about after church and chat, get to know people so that over the weeks you can encourage each other. I'll be the first to admit that those aren't imaginative suggestions... but use your gifts, and commit them to kindness to the people of the church.

Ruth is later praised for her kindness, don't you want Jesus one day to say the same to you? "Well done, good and faithful servant, you've invested what I've given you in the place where it matters", look at chapter 2v12: "May the Lord repay you for what you've done, may you be richly rewarded by the lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge". Wouldn't that be glorious to hear?

It's a tall order though isn't it? So let me just try to finish on a high and remind you that despite appearances Ruth doesn't do this in her own strength, and Naomi doesn't get rest simply by going back to the land of Israel and sponging off family. Ruth is the story of how God breaks the cycle of sin in judges, and he does it by in his grace establishing the line of his king- first David, but ultimately Jesus. At his cross, and resurrection, Christ's sovereignty and goodness are demonstrated beyond challenge, and if we've got any goodness comparable to Ruth's it's because like in-grafted vines we draw our strength and Spirit from him. If we've got a portion of the rest that Naomi hungers for it's because as weary and heavy laden travellers we've heard him say "come to me, and I will give you rest".

The world is chaotic and far beyond our control, but there is no firmer foundation, no surer guarantee than the promise of Jesus, our God who saves. So whether life is rosy, or blessings seem far off, let's cling to Him, in the knowledge that he comes to the aid of his people.