

“From Fullness to Emptiness” (Ruth 1)

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I love the Christmas season. Probably the two things I enjoy the most are Christmas lights and Christmas music. I also love the spirit of generosity and celebration. But Christmas can also have a dark side to it. For some people, the holidays remind them not of joy, but of loss. Perhaps there's an empty chair at a table where a loved one once sat. Perhaps there's depression, which is made worse with all the cheer in the air. In this life, on any given day, someone is realizing his or her dreams at the same time that someone else is living out a nightmare.

Just this week, we heard the tragic news of a plane crash in Colombia. The plane was carrying most of the members of a Brazilian soccer team, Chapecoense, which was traveling to play in the finals of the Copa Sudamericana. Over seventy people died on that plane crash, including one player who had just found out that his wife was pregnant. He was only 22 years old. The young couple was about to celebrate their one-year anniversary. Now, a widow faces an uncertain future with her unborn child. I can't imagine what Christmas will be like for her.¹

What would we do if we were in that same situation? What do you do when your life feels torn apart by unforeseen or uncontrollable circumstances? Perhaps it's a death in the family, or a health crisis, or a job loss, or the loss of a relationship. How do you handle such things?

When you're going through difficult times, it may feel as if God, if he exists, doesn't love you. He may seem very distant and uncaring. Where is God when our lives are blown apart?

Perhaps our lives are a mess not because of some outside circumstances that we can't control. Perhaps we have done things that have brought ruin to our lives. We've made bad decisions. We've been foolish, selfish, and wrong. Perhaps you're here today with feelings of regret and guilt, wondering where hope can be found. If that is the case, you may wonder if God would love you. What happens when we feel we've made such a mess of our lives that God can't possibly forgive us?

¹ Eliza Mackintosh, “Chapecoense Player Found out He Was to Be Father a Week before Crash Death,” *CNN*, November 30, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/29/americas/chapecoense-soccer-player-father>, accessed December 2, 2016.

It is Christmas time, and I do want to talk about what Christmas means, but I don't want to do that through the usual route. Usually, we read passages at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel, passages that talk explicitly about the birth of Jesus. But sometimes, in order to get a fresh view of Christmas, we need to take a different approach, from a different angle. So, this year, I want to go back further in history, to a time about 1,200 years before Jesus was born. This month, we're going to look at a short book in the Old Testament called Ruth. There are at least three reasons why this book is a good one for Christmas.

The first reason is that Ruth is mentioned in Jesus' genealogy. At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew tells us who some of Jesus' ancestors were. In a male-dominated society, it's unusual that five of the people Matthew mentions are women. One of those women is Ruth (Matt. 1:5). All the women are unusual because they are all unlikely ancestors of Jesus. Some are women associated with sinful activities. And some are Gentiles, not Jews, which is significant because it shows that Jesus doesn't belong to just one ethnic group of people.

The second reason we're going to study the book of Ruth this month is that it foreshadows the birth of Jesus. In the book of Ruth, we're told about how God provided a special child, who would go on to be the grandfather of King David. Jesus is a descendant of David and Jesus is the true King. In fact, all of the Old Testament foreshadows and anticipates the coming of Jesus.

The third reason for studying the book of Ruth is that, in a way, it presents the story of the Bible in a condensed form. It tells of creation that is lost and then restored. So, if you're unfamiliar with the story of the Bible, this isn't a bad place to start.

And, if you're wondering why we should study a piece of literature that's about three thousand years old, written in a foreign language (Hebrew), about events that took place roughly 3,200 years ago, in a different culture and thousands of miles away from here, that's not a bad question to have. We believe that the Bible is God's word. It's not just a collection of nice stories, or some dead people's best thoughts about God. We believe that God has revealed himself in these pages. And we also believe that though the times have changed, and though we live in a different culture and use a different language, the human condition remains the same. Every human being has had to deal with loss and death. Every human being has hopes and dreams. Every human being loves and wants to be loved. If you read the Bible seriously and carefully, you will find that it addresses all issues that are common to human beings.

With all that being said, I want us to read the first chapter of Ruth. The whole book is short, only four chapters consisting of eighty-five verses. We'll read the first chapter and the first twenty-two verses today. After that, I'll explain what the passage means and what it means for us today.

Now let's read Ruth 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. 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. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

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. 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." 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." 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.

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" ²⁰ She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ 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 upon me?"

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 barley harvest.²

The book of Ruth is all about kindness. It's about the kindness that people show to each other. But ultimately, it's about God's kindness. We might say it's about how God shows kindness to certain people through other people. But it's also a book about kindness shown to people in a very dark time in national and personal history.

And that's my first point. The story of Ruth begins in a very dark time.

If we're going to understand what we just read, we're going to have to understand something about the setting of this story. In the very first verse, we're told that the story takes place in the days of the judges. Now, here's how *not* to read the Bible. Don't read that and say, "Oh, so judicial supremacy was big back then, too. I guess judges have always legislated from the bench." No, the judges of the Bible aren't like Supreme Court justices. They were more like military leaders.

But in order to understand this story properly, I'm going to have to back to the beginning of the Bible. Here's the story up to this point.

In the beginning, a very good God made a very good world. And he made humans to be in a special relationship with him, to represent him, to reflect his character, to relate to him as obedient children relate to a loving father. But from the beginning, human beings have failed to acknowledge God as the Creator and Sustainer and King over everything. They haven't trusted him. They haven't loved him. They haven't lived for him, even though the reason why any of us exist is to live for God.

When the fracture in the relationship between God and people occurred, God put a partial judgment on his creation. Life would be hard. The environment wouldn't be perfect; there would be things like famines. And the relationships between people would be broken, too. Worst of all, death entered into a very good world.

But God is a good God and he has a plan to restore everything. He called one man, Abraham, to enter into a special relationship with him. And he told this one old man, Abraham, that he would bless the entire world through this man's family.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Over many generations, Abraham's family grew and multiplied into the nation of Israel. Though they were large, they found themselves slaves in Egypt. Their lives working as slaves for Pharaoh, the king, were hard and they cried out to God. God rescued them through the leadership of Moses and led them out of Egypt and into freedom through a series of miraculous events. God gave them his law and led them through the wilderness, eventually into the Promised Land of Canaan.

It was after that time that they were led by a series of judges, or, as one theologian calls them, "warlords."³ This was sometime roughly between as early as 1400 BC to about 1050 BC. During this time, a pattern emerged. The Israelites failed to love and obey God. They worshiped false gods instead. When this happened, God gave them over to foreign nations, who would defeat them. Then the people would cry out to God and he would raise up a judge, a powerful yet flawed military savior, who defeat Israel's enemies. And then the people would forget God again, the cycle would repeat. This period was often a time of "moral anarchy,"⁴ a time of "frightful social and religious chaos."⁵ There's a refrain that is repeated toward the end of the book of Judges, which is, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6; also 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Generally, things seemed to be getting worse and worse, as the moral condition of Israel deteriorated. Imagine filth circling the drain. That's what the time of the judges was like.

We're told that during that time, there was a famine. The famine may have been God's punishment for Israel's disobedience and their worship of false gods, which is known as idolatry.⁶ So, this famine was probably the result of the nation of Israel's sin. Surely, the fact that we have any famines or any death is the result of sin, in general, in the world. Sin is not just a bad thing we do. It's a power that has invaded the world. It's a power that has invaded our hearts, distorting our desires. I've used this definition of sin before, but I'll use it again because it's good: One Christian, a British writer named Francis Spufford, calls sin "the human propensity to

³ Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), passim.

⁴ Ibid. 588.

⁵ Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 84.

⁶ As a consequence of Israel's disobedience, God would send pestilence on the land and break the Israelite's supply of bread (Lev. 26:25-26; Deut. 28:21). He would curse their basket and kneading bowl, along with the fruit of their womb, the fruit of their ground, as well as their animals (Deut. 28:17-18). God also promised to send drought, blight, and mildew if his people disobeyed him (Deut. 28:22). It is safe to assume that the famine here is a result of the people's disobedience.

[foul] things up.” He writes, “It’s our active inclination to break stuff, ‘stuff’ here including moods, promises, relationships we care about, and our own well-being and other people’s, as well as material objects whose high gloss positively seems to invite a big fat scratch.”⁷ Israel had a propensity to break stuff, and God couldn’t let them destroy themselves and the good creation he made. So, he corrected them through events like famines.

Famines were frightening events. Remember, this is about 3,200 years ago. This is before refrigeration and electricity. If crops didn’t grow, people didn’t eat. It would be like if our electricity went out. So, it’s understandable that one man, named Elimelech, takes his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, and leaves Israel to go to Moab. Ironically, Bethlehem means “house of bread,” but the house was now empty. They must have been desperate because Moab was an enemy of Israel. It was a nation to the east of the Dead Sea, about 50 miles away.

It was bad enough that this family had to leave their home. But then Elimelech dies. This would have been a terrible tragedy for Naomi. But she had her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. They would take care of her. And they married women from Moab. This was generally forbidden in Israel, because there was a concern that such marriages would lead Israelites to worship the gods of foreign nations (Deut. 7:1–5). But these men would have no one else to marry. So, the two sons married women from Moab and they lived there ten years. And then the two sons die!

This would have been a frightening situation for Naomi. Widows were very vulnerable in this society. There wasn’t much of a social safety net. There certainly wasn’t a modern welfare system. Younger widows could return to their parents (Gen. 38:11; Lev. 22:13) or remarry. But an older widow like Naomi would have to rely on her children, and now her sons were dead. Since widows were so vulnerable, God is said to be their protector (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 68:5; 146:9). Within Israel’s law, there were regulations intended to protect and take care of widows, which is an indication of how vulnerable they were (Exod. 22:21-24; Deut. 14:28-29; 24:19-22; 26:12). If Naomi and her daughters-in-law Ruth were going to survive, they would need God to come to their aid.

There’s something else we need to understand if we’re going to see how bad Naomi’s situation was. In Israel, it was very important for men to continue their line of descent. If a man didn’t produce descendants who could inherit his name and his property, it was as if he was

⁷ Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 27.

denied a legacy. He would be forgotten, erased from the pages of history. Naomi could have survived the death of her husband if she thought her sons could produce male offspring who would keep the family name alive. But they didn't do that. It seems as if the memory of her family would be wiped off the face of the earth.

This bad news is delivered in five short verses. If you're not used to reading the Bible, you might miss a lot of details by reading too quickly. The Bible often uses a very economic or compact style, stating crushing events like deaths with a minimum of words. But the weight of these events is huge. To understand the magnitude of these events, we simply need to look up some information and use our imaginations to imagine what this would have been like. It would be a frightening time.

Though our lives aren't necessarily as hard as Naomi's, all of us go through dark times. The Bible tells us the reason why there are tragedies: All of us have done what is right in our own eyes. We have not loved and honored God. We have turned our backs on the source of light, love, beauty, truth, and life. When we do that, we find darkness, hate, ugliness, lies, and death. The Bible is very frank about how difficult life can be. It sugarcoats nothing. I think one of the more compelling aspects of the Bible is that it accurately depicts the human condition and it gives a very compelling, complete, and coherent explanation for why things are the way that they are in this world.

Here's a related point. If my first point is that the story of Ruth is set in a dark time, my second point is this: In dark times, it can feel like God is against us. Look at the way Naomi responds to this situation. After her sons die, she decides to return to Israel, back to her home of Bethlehem. At first, her daughters-in-law want to go with her. But she tells them twice not to go with her. She says they can find husbands in Moab, but she can't give them husbands. She is too old to have children. And if they go with her back to Israel, it is very unlikely that they will find Israelite husbands, because they usually didn't marry women from Moab. You have to remember the way that Moab started. Abraham, whom I mentioned earlier, had a nephew named Lot. Lot and his daughters were the only ones to survive the destruction of Sodom. And when they did that, Lot's daughters were concerned that they wouldn't have anyone to marry and have children with. So, they got their father drunk, had sex with him, and then had children. One of them was named Moab (see Gen. 19:30–38). Needless to say, Moab had a pretty shady past. See, I told you that the Bible presents humanity in all its messed-up glory!

Anyway, Naomi's point is that her daughters-in-law have no future in Israel. At least that's how it seems to her. After saying it's impossible for her to produce husbands for Orpah and Naomi, she says, in verse 13, "No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me."

Then, when she arrives in Bethlehem, she says, "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 upon me?" (vv. 20–21).

Naomi seems to be blaming God. She says that God's hand is against her, and now her life is bitter. The name Naomi means "pleasant one." She says her life is anything but pleasant now. Therefore, she wants to be called Mara, which means "bitter." She says that God has "testified against me and . . . brought calamity upon me." In her eyes, God has brought about this situation.

Now, Naomi is right about something. She understands that the one true God, the God of Israel, is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. And this God is ultimately in control of everything. It's not as though God had nothing to do with this. She's not wrong that God has a plan that he is working out. But she's wrong about God's character. She assumes that God is against her. And that's what life can feel like for people. In fact, the Bible is full of laments and even complaints against God. Read the Psalms, with their cries of "How long, O LORD?" Read the book of Job. People in the Bible often wrestle with God. It's okay to do that.

But we shouldn't think that when things are difficult that God is out to get us. A British Christian who lived almost four hundred years ago, a Puritan preacher and author named John Flavel (1628-1691) wrote a book on God's mysterious ways. Flavel's first three wives died, two of them passing away before he wrote *The Mystery of Providence*, his famous book. In it, he observes, "For alas! we judge by sense and appearance, and do not consider that God's heart may be towards us while the hand of His providence seems to be against us."⁸ Catch that. He says that because we can only see what's before us, when bad things happen, it seems as if God's hand is against us. But we don't consider that God has a plan for everything, and that he uses tragedies to bring about something good. God's heart may be toward us even when everything seems dark and there is no light to be found. He may seem quiet when we long to hear from him.

⁸ John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (1678; repr. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 139.

But here's my third point: Even in the midst of darkness, there is hope. Sometimes, we overlook the small signs of hope, the ways that God is caring for us. We see this in this chapter. In verse 6, we learn that Naomi decides to return to her homeland, because "she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food." "The LORD had visited his people"—that's a pretty important phrase in the Bible. It's used when God begins to rescue Israel out of slavery in Egypt (Ex. 3:16; 4:31). It's used by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin and his prophetic forerunner, the one who came to tell people that the Savior had come (Luke 1:68). When God visits his people, he is about to rescue them.

And while Naomi is bitterly lamenting her circumstances, she seems to overlook Ruth. Even though Naomi told Ruth to stay in Moab, Ruth decided to go with Naomi. From a human perspective, Ruth had nothing to gain. She didn't have family other than Naomi in Israel. She probably wouldn't find a husband. If she stayed in Moab, she could at least remarry or live with her parents. But she chooses to go with Naomi. She probably did that because she was concerned for Naomi's welfare. She also did this because she seems to have put her trust in the God of Israel. This is what Ruth says to Naomi, in verses 16 and 17: "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." What an amazing promise! "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." She says that only death will separate them.

Do you see what this is? This is Ruth sacrificing her whole way of life, and perhaps even her future, to take care of Naomi. This is Ruth stepping out in faith, trusting in God.

Before I move on, I want to say this: Perhaps you're here and you're feeling like your life is bitter. If you are in a situation where you're hurting or feeling hopeless, try to look around and see even the small ways that God has been kind to you. If you have your basic physical needs met, that's God's kindness to you. And you're here this morning. That is God's kindness to you. He is speaking to you through his word. He is revealing something of himself to you this morning. You're in a church where you're hearing truth, not some message that only aims to make people feel good or to entertain people. And not only that, but you're in a church that consists of people who are kind. We're not perfect. Believe me, we have our flaws. But the

people here are kind, loving, generous, and sincere. And to be in the midst of a group of people like that is God's kindness to you.

And if you're feeling like God may be against you, or that he is too distant, I want you to consider this: This is a God who knows what it's like to suffer. The whole story of the Bible, and certainly the story of Christmas, is that we cannot fix this world. We cannot fix our lives, not in any ultimate and final sense. We cannot save ourselves. We need God himself to come down, to become a man, to save us. We've already sung that this morning. We sang, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." That's about Jesus. He is also called Emmanuel, which means, "God with us." He came to ransom "captive Israel." He rescues us from sin and, in the end of the story, death.

When God visited his people, he became a man. He fulfilled all the righteous demands of God's laws. He lived the perfect life that we don't live. And then he suffered. He was hated, betrayed, mocked, and tortured as if he were a terrorist. He was given capital punishment, the kind given to the worst criminals. But he never did anything wrong. He did that to pay for our wrongdoing. Ruth sacrificed her way of life to help Naomi, but Jesus literally gave his life so that we could live. His death seemed like a dark time, but it led to light, and this was all part of God's plan.

So even if you don't understand what is happening in your life, you can't say that God doesn't know what it's like to suffer. You can't say that God is distant. The story of Christmas is that God came to us and lived a hard life. And he even died for us. That means we can be forgiven of anything we've ever done. That means that no one is beyond God's love. Ruth was an outsider who became part of God's people. The same can be said for anyone, if they would only come to Jesus and trust that he is our only hope, in this life and the next.

You may not understand this whole story now. That's okay. I hope to explain more of it as we go. If you want to learn more about this God, please return next week. I'm not asking you to have the faith of Ruth right now. But perhaps you can step out in faith just a bit by coming back to learn more. That invitation is also God's kindness to you.

I'll close with some words from another Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming, but in his world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.