

Hope in the Midst of Despair

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Oh, guys, you can do better than that. Good morning. Great. Thank you. Great. Welcome to Watermark. My name's Chris. If you don't know me, I'm one of the pastors here.

And it's just really exciting to, after Easter, to be getting into a new series. We're going to do a new four-part series in the Book of Ruth. And I'm personally really excited about this because it's one of the most beautifully written stories, I think, in the whole of the Bible.

And so we're going to go for the next four weeks looking at this love story. And what we've done is we've looked at the person of Jesus kind of moving up to Easter. And we've seen how Jesus really is part of the climax of God's great redemption story. But sometimes we wonder how this kind of, how Jesus fits into our ordinary, everyday, mundane lives, the ups and downs that we go through. We wonder, where is God's big story? Where do I fit in? Where does my story fit into this? And the Book of Ruth is going to show us how our story fits into where God's story is working and what He is doing. Because God's writing a script, and your life and my life is part of that script. And so what I want to do is I want to just, let's just pray, and let's ask God to just really speak to us this morning.

Father, I thank you that even as we're here this morning, it's not an accident that we're here. Thank you. You have brought us here because you want to speak to us.

I pray that you'd open our eyes, open our ears, open our hearts, Lord, to hear what you want to say. I pray that you'd use my words, Lord, inadequate as they are, to just be able to convey something of how beautiful you are. Please be present here this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen.

[2 : 0 4] So this book that we're going to be looking at, the Book of Ruth, I really encourage you to be reading along as we go. One of the interesting things is, God is not prominent in kind of the center stage of the story. Okay? In the Gospels, you know, Jesus is kind of center stage. But in Ruth, God is kind of working behind the scenes in everyday ordinary life. He's there every moment, but He's kind of behind the scenes. He's working out His plan. And so what we're going to do is, you know, like a good TV drama kind of unfolds bit by bit, the tension builds. We're going to look chapter by chapter over these next four weeks to see how this storyline is going to play out. So don't go to the last page before you've read, you've looked at the first part of it. Okay? So we're going to, I'm going to share, just go through the story and pick out some things that even as 21st century readers, we might miss from the background here. I want us to see what the author is trying to do with this book. And then we're just going to come through and see four things that this passage really just wants to speak and share with us. Okay? So let's go. Let's dive in to this book. First line, in the days when the judges ruled.

We're going to stop there. In the days when the judges ruled. What you need to know is the book of Ruth is written during this period of the judges. Judges is the book before Ruth in our Bibles.

And what you need to know is the last verse of the book of Judges summarizes the whole book. It says this, in those days there was no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

This was a dark time. This was a time where people had stopped worshiping God, people who go in their own way. There was injustice, there was violence, there was rape. It was a horrific time. And the book of Ruth is this little glimmer of light in the midst of this dark time. And what you can see is things are not easy in Bethlehem because God's judgment has come upon the people of God. There is a famine in Bethlehem. Now Bethlehem, we all kind of know it from the Christmas story, but actually Bethlehem was a small town. And it's famous for being King David's birthplace. But before we get to there, we've got to know what it means. It means literally house of bread. That's what Bethlehem means, house of bread. And it's ironic because the house of bread has no bread. There's no food here in the house of bread. It's a tough time. So this guy, Elimelech, he decides, I'm going to leave the promised land. I'm going to go all the way down to this place called Moab because I want to find some food down there. And so you might think that sounds like a good idea. Okay, find the nearest supermarket.

They didn't have a supermarket. So Moab seems a good place. But if you were a first century, if you were a Jewish reader and you heard the word Moab, you'd be going, uh-oh. Because Moab was the son of Lot, who was Abraham's nephew. And he was a son by incest. And the story didn't get any better because Moab became a pagan nation. And they kept following idols and they kept opposing Israel. When Israel wanted to get into the promised land, they were trying to get through Moab. They said, can we come in? The Moabites said, no way. You're not coming our way. In fact, what they did was they even sent a guy called Balaam to curse the Israelites. And then the Moabite women came along and seduced the Israelite men and took them away to worship other gods and God's judgment came upon them. So when an Israelite heard the word Moab, they were thinking, that's not good news. In fact, even in Deuteronomy 23, the Moabites were forbidden to come into the Jewish camp because of their idolatry and their wickedness. So when this says they're going down to Moab, that's like an unemployed woman coming to you and saying, I'm going to the red light district in one child to look for work. That's the same kind of impression. You're going, that doesn't sound like a good idea. They're leaving God's people, going to a dangerous pagan place. And when they get there, tragedy strikes. Naomi loses her husband. And then what happens very quickly afterwards, it says her sons marry two foreign Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Again, a Jewish reader will be going, oh no, that's not good news because Jewish men were not meant to marry foreign women, not because of racism, but because they would lead them away to follow their gods. And so there's one poor choice going to Moab and then there's another poor choice in who they're marrying. And for 10 years, Ruth and

[7 : 13] Orpah, they have no children. They're barren. And for Jewish, in the Old Testament, barrenness and famine and death are often curses for disobedience. That's what the law said. Tragedy strikes again.

Her two sons die. Is this a happy story so far? No. In that culture, men were the landowners and your husband and your sons were your financial security, your future, your hope. They would protect you from being taken advantage of by other men. They were the status. Their name gave you status. So when both her husband and her sons die, she is basically now a vulnerable, nameless nobody.

In fact, many widows ended up just in prostitution to survive. And you know, actually in verse 5, where our translation says, Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. It actually says, The woman. Because she's lost her name. She's a nobody in society.

Now we don't know, the way the author writes it, we don't know, is this God's judgment coming on them because of their poor decisions? Or is it just the tragedy of life? There seems to be ambiguity there. Elimelech was the one who took them down to Moab. But it's the women who are the survivors. This is a dark time. And then a glimmer of hope comes. Naomi hears that God has restocked Bethlehem with food. That's verse 6. That he's come to his people.

The house of bread has got bread again. And she starts the 7 to 10 day walk to go back to Bethlehem. To a place she's not seen for 10 years. To her people. She's returning to God's people again. And as she goes, she's got these two daughter-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

[9 : 19] And they go with her. But she knows her life is over. She's probably over 50. She's not going to get married again. No one to look after her. Destined to poverty and a life of insecurity.

And so out of love for these two daughters-in-law, she tries to persuade them to go back. She says, like three times, she says, turn back. Turn back. Turn back. Because she knows they're Moabites. If they were going to come into Israel, they're not going to be accepted.

If they come into Israel, she knows their marriage prospects are low. She knows that there's an Israelite law which said in Deuteronomy, if you have a widow, the brother of the husband who had died was meant to marry that widow to provide protection for her. But she's got no more sons.

There's nobody else who can marry them and provide protection for them. So she's saying, listen, just go back to Moab. You've got better chances there. You might find a husband there. You might find a future there. You might find a hope there. I've got nothing. My life is over. I'm done.

I've got no hope. But my life is more bitter than for you because you might still have a chance. So go back. Don't ruin your life. That's what she's saying. And so as the story goes on, Orpah knows this is true. So she's like, okay, I want to stay with you, but I know that I'm going to lose everything. So she decides to turn back to Moab. And do you notice it says that she turns back to her gods? That's what it says in verse 15. She turns back to her people and her gods in verse 15. But Ruth, you see the contrast with Ruth. You see, because Ruth, she faces the full prospect of having every ounce of security stripped from her. She could become an outsider, no future, no prospects. And yet where Orpah left in verse 14, it says, Ruth clung to Naomi.

[11 : 33] Do you know that word clung is the same word in Genesis 2 where it says, when a man leaves his father and mother and he clings to his wife and they become one flesh? This is as close as you're going to get. And the author is saying, this is one of the most beautiful expressions of love that you could see. I mean, look at this verse. This verse is amazing. Memorize this verse. It's verse 16 to 17. Ruth says, you're not going to be alone. You're never going to be alone. You may not have a husband or sons, but don't urge me to leave you. I'm not taking no for an answer here.

I'm going with you. My mind's made up. Where you go, I'll go. Where you stay, I'll stay. Your people shall be my people. Your gods will be my gods. Where you die, I will die. And there will I be buried.

She's saying, Naomi, you're not abandoned. Your life's not over. I'll be with you. And I will lay down my life. I'll lay down everything else for you.

My marriage prospects everything. You know, one commentator says this, with radical self-sacrifice, she abandons every base of security that any person, let alone a poor widow, in that cultural context would have clung to. Her native homeland, her own people, even her own gods.

Wow, this is powerful. How can she be so different from Orpah? That's the question. Because whereas Naomi had left her life in God's covenant people to find bread elsewhere, Ruth is leaving her old pagan life and is running to the community of God, where she knows that there is a God of Israel there, who she's going to come to trust.

[13 : 37] But she has no assurance of what lies ahead of her. She doesn't know. Kevin talked about that path last week, where you just, you don't know everything that's going to happen. All she can do is trust this God will provide. She knows gods of Moab don't offer her protection.

See, it's a big deal, a big deal for Ruth to leave. But she's finding refuge in God, the God of Israel. And that's the foundation of her love.

Now, this is interesting in our culture, because I think we live in a commitment-phobic culture, right? You know, we get an invite on Facebook, and our favorite response to whether we're going or not is, maybe, right? We don't want to commit because we're afraid that we might miss out on good things. We live in fear of FOMO, fear of missing out, right? You know, we fear we might miss out in relationships if we commit too much. We fear if we stay too long in this job, we might miss out on opportunities. We fear that if I serve God too much, then maybe my life is not going to work out as it should do. We have FOMO. And yet Ruth's love, costly, sacrificial, is a love that I think every one of us wants to be loved like that.

And I think deep down, every one of us would love to have the courage to love like that. You see, I watched a YouTube video of a Polish guy during the Second World War called Janusz Korczak.

I'm not sure if I pronounced it correctly. But anyway, he was the director of an orphanage of 192 Jewish kids during the Second World War. When the Nazis came to take those kids out of the concentration camp, they told him, stay behind. We're just taking the kids.

[15 : 34] Do you know what he did? He took their hands and he marched with them to the concentration camp. He got to the gate of the concentration camp. One of the guards there recognized him and said, hey, I can help you escape here. Don't worry.

Do you know what he said? He said, no, I'm not leaving these kids. They need to know that right to the end, they're not alone. And so he walked into the concentration camp.

He went to his death with the very children that he'd been looking after. Because he would not leave them alone to face that. That is what Ruth is doing here.

That is what Ruth is doing here. She's showing a depth of costly love that is so challenging. And you see in the story, Naomi is speechless.

Our translation says she stopped urging her. She stopped urging her to not come. But actually, the word says, she didn't say anymore. So seven days walking, and they're just walking in silence until they reach Bethlehem.

[16 : 45] And you see, it's been 10 years. Elimelech and Naomi left 10 years ago. She returns now, no husband, no sons, completely different woman, haggard, downcast, aged.

People can hardly recognize her. They say, is this Naomi? Naomi? Is it really you? And do you know what she says? She says, don't call me Naomi, because Naomi means pleasant.

She says, call me Mara, because Mara means bitter. She says, Shaddai, the Almighty, Shaddai, it means the mountain one, the one who is sovereign over the whole earth, has made my life bitter.

I went away full, but I've come back empty. You stripped me of everything that was precious to me. I'm bitter, life is bitter, because God, like a witness in a case, has testified against me.

I know God's in control of every moment, and what's happened to me shows me that he's against me. I wonder if you've ever felt like that. I wonder if you ever felt whether God is really good, whether you feel like he's against you.

[18 : 01] Why didn't he answer that prayer when I was asking for him to do something? Why am I still single? Is God against me? And right at the end of the chapter, what we have is we have Ruth, and the author explicitly tells us Ruth the Moabite.

That means Ruth the immigrant. Ruth the outsider, who wasn't supposed to be in Israel because she's a Moabite. There she is, standing right next to Naomi, and Naomi can't see that Ruth is God's kindness to her.

She can't see it. And she can't see, do you see what the last line of the chapter is? The barley harvest is beginning.

She'd lost food, she'd lost family, and now God is beginning this story of restoring and showing kindness.

But there's three chapters left, so I'm not going to get into the rest of the story. But what do we get from this? Okay, this story is a beautiful, tragic story.

[19 : 19] What do we get from this? I want to go through four things, but I want us to see, this is a story of bitterness or trust. Bitterness or trust.

Because I don't know about you and what you're going through in life right now, but whether things are great or whether things are not great, sooner or later, you will face situations in your life where you will be tempted to grow bitter.

You know, there will be times where you're tempted to say, why is this happening to me? God, are you really fair? This doesn't seem right.

You see, whether it's because of your own choices or whether it's because of the way life has happened or other people's choices, there is a reality of the brokenness of our world.

You see, I have a friend who got married a while ago and she moved to a new place, got a new job, had a new life. Everything was great. A month in, she blacks out, gets to the hospital and they find out she had an ectopic pregnancy.

[20 : 29] The surgeon has to operate. It's really serious. They had to cut out one of her fallopian tubes. She's left in the hospital for a number of weeks feeling alone in this new place wondering, God, this is not the way it's supposed to be.

I've only been married a month. You know, I'm supposed to be kind of productive and getting on with my new life and I feel like life's just on hold. Ever feel like that when life just feels like it's on hold?

You know, she's left with uncertainties about the future. Will we be able to have kids? Will it happen again if I get pregnant? We've only been married a month. Did I make a wrong decision?

Is God punishing me for something I did? And right when the clouds roll in, we have a choice to run to God or to run away from God.

To stay in Moab and to run to Moab or to run back to the God of Israel. And so we need to see a number of things. The first thing we need to see is in this chapter, God is sovereign.

[21 : 36] God is sovereign. Naomi knows this. She says, in all of these circumstances, God's hand has gone out against me. God has made my life bitter.

The Lord has brought me back empty. God has testified against me. It's God who's done all of this. She knows, she's understood something, that God is Shaddai, the one who is sovereignly in control of every single circumstance that happens in your life and my life.

She knows that. He could change her circumstances at the blink of an eye. You know, but he hasn't. There's a guy called Rabbi Kushner who wrote a book called Why Bad Things Happen to Good People.

Has anyone read it? Okay. Why Bad Things Happen to Good People. And his argument is basically this. God is really good and kind but he's just not able to change things.

He'd love to be able to help us out a little bit in these circumstances but he really can't because, you know, he's not that powerful.

[22 : 45] That's not what Naomi believes. That's not what the Bible teaches. Jesus says, not a sparrow falls to the ground outside of my father's care.

He's in control of every detail. God is sovereign. But the second thing is that God's smile can sometimes be hidden in clouds. What do I mean by that?

Because sometimes if you know that God is sovereign that can sometimes make it even harder to accept the things that happen in our lives, right? Because if he could change it, why doesn't he?

Why doesn't he answer my prayers all the time? Because Naomi doesn't struggle with believing that God is in control. She struggles with knowing whether God is really good.

Whether God really loves her. You see, Naomi, Naomi tells Orpah and Ruth, may God show kindness to you. In other words, she believes up here God can be kind.

[23 : 45] Maybe to everyone else, but he's not going to be kind to her. Because she doesn't believe that because she sees these circumstances that God is really showing kindness to her.

God is going to be and we've got to see a couple of different things through this. One is this. When they went to Moab, was that a good choice? No.

And sometimes when we make poor choices, there are consequences. We can't think that if we walk out of God's people and God's presence and disobedience, that there won't be consequences.

You know, if you go and put your hand on a hot stove, you expect it to burn. You don't go and expect nothing to happen. Sin always has consequences, but it clouds our view of God as well.

And some of us actually, we know deep down we've been staying in Moab for a little while. We know that in our hearts, we come on a Sunday, but deep down, God seems a million miles away and we prefer things like news, YouTube, Facebook, anything else other than spending time with God because what drives us is something else.

[25 : 03] Our work drives us. Our relationships drive us. What my boss thinks about me drives us. And God is just a Sunday exercise. But God here says it doesn't matter whether you have made poor choices or good choices.

He says, I want you to return from Moab. Return. I want to show you my kindness. I want to show you my kindness. Because the thing is, actually, if you really realize it, every single one of us have chosen to go to Moab in our lives.

We frequently do. You know, I want success in my career more than I want success in God's eyes. We've not loved other people as He's called us to love.

We've not obeyed as He's called us to obey. And so sometimes, because we have this kind of performance-based mentality, we think that if God gives us a difficult situation, if God strips something away from us, that maybe He's punishing us.

But is that true? Sometimes there are consequences, but Psalm 34 says, even the righteous suffer many afflictions.

[26 : 13] I don't know what you're going through now. Maybe you're having a great time. Maybe you're having a tough time. But God, don't put God in this little performance box where if you've worked hard enough, then you should get the good grades.

And good grades means happy, comfortable, easy life. And then if you've been a bit lazy, you haven't read your Bible recently, you haven't prayed, therefore you're always going to get bad grades. God's going to give you a hard life. He's going to give you a terrible life.

It doesn't work like that. Sure, there are consequences, consequences, but God is wanting to show us his smile even when we feel like the clouds are there.

Because here's the third thing. God is sovereign. God's smile is sometimes hidden by the clouds. Sometimes that's our own sinfulness and the consequences. Sometimes that's just life. But the third thing is God strips us to show us his kindness.

You know, some of us have grown bitter. We've grown bitter at God. We've grown bitter at our circumstances.

[27 : 18] Maybe you don't think it's really bitter. Maybe just a little bit of bitterness. But we have expectations. We have hopes. We grow up with the expectations that God is just going to bless my life and make it just flourish in every way.

And we see in our lives he does do that. In our community group, we've seen so many answers to prayer for whether it's work, whether it's relationship, whether it's babies, all kinds of things.

God does bless us. But isn't it true that sometimes the really good things we want can become the very hope in our life itself? We think life is found in those things.

We want the gifts more than the giver. You see, Naomi believed that her life and her hope was determined by her husband and her sons.

She, her security lay with them. And as God stripped those things away from her, she thought life was over. That was it. No hope.

[28 : 22] Because she placed all her hope in that, in her husband and all her sons. But let me ask you, in your life, what in your life, if it was taken away from you today, would leave you feeling like life was over?

You had no hope left. What if I said you'll never earn more money than you do today in the rest of your life? What if I said you'll never move higher in your company than you do today, than you are today in your life?

What if I said you will never get married? What if I said your kids will not get into that school? Would that disappoint you deeply?

Because these are good desires. They're not bad desires. These are good desires. Would that disappoint you deeply? Or would that devastate you to the point you felt there was no life worth living?

Because we take good desires and we place all our weight on them. And when we do that, we make what the Bible calls an idol. And the thing is, when you have an idol of a hope weighed so strongly on certain things, then it terrifies us to think that we could ever live without it.

[29 : 43] And the difficult thing is, with these desires, is they bind us. Because you notice, for example, if you struggle with singleness, and then you go and look on Facebook, and everyone else of your friends is getting married, does that lead to joy or does that lead to bitterness?

It can easily lead to bitterness. Or when you see that somebody else's spouse seems so much more proactive, godly, whatever it is, than your spouse, can we suddenly end up getting that little bit of resentment, saying, it's not fair.

God, I've been trying to serve you, I've been trying to do these things for you, but it doesn't seem to be working out as it should. You see, when bitterness creeps in, that's a warning light to say, idol alert.

You have placed a good desire to become an ultimate desire, and you've replaced God as your ultimate hope. And the thing is, we can be blind to this, which is why sometimes in life, God graciously strips us of things.

Not because he wants to make our lives hard, but because he wants to show you something. Because you see, Naomi was so wrapped up in her bitterness that she failed to see God's kindness.

[31 : 13] You see, in spite of the poor choices she'd made, God hasn't finished with her. This is beautiful. Some of you feel like you've messed up in your life.

God's just kind of getting you a hard time because you've made some poor choices. This tells you God's not finished with you. Because who provides food again in Bethlehem?

God does. God is trying to draw her back into the people of God. What's the time that she comes back? She comes back it's the barley harvest.

You see, the very thing she'd gone down to Moab to try and get was the very thing that actually God was providing. The barley harvest is when bread is made. You get food.

God was wanting to show you, you come to me, you'll be satisfied in a way that you go to Moab you won't be. But the thing is, even when there are these signs of kindness, the rays are peeking through the clouds, she doesn't see them.

[32 : 18] Because, do you remember when she said, I went away full and now I'm empty, I've got nothing. Who's standing right next to her? Ruth is.

Ruth who has laid down her life for her. Ruth who has given everything for her and she can't see it. She can't see it. But we're only at chapter one.

There's three more chapters and as you see Ruth, as you see the barley harvest, these are glimpses of the kindness of what God is wanting to show to Naomi.

And that's what he wants to show to us. Sometimes we're so focused on what we don't have in our lives that we fail to see the kindness that God is trying to show you day in and day out.

And so when we're struggling, maybe you're struggling wondering how am I going to provide in my life? Maybe you're struggling with a sense of things just don't seem fair. God seems to not be coming through for me in a whole load of ways.

[33 : 29] We need to know he's sovereign. We need to know sometimes his smile is hidden in the clouds. We need to know that sometimes he strips us because he wants us to see that God has got more for you in himself than just in his gifts.

The fourth thing is he wants to consider his kindness. You see, what you need to do wherever you are right now in your life, you need to look up and see not just Ruth is with you, there is a better Ruth who's with you.

Because Jesus Christ was the one who clings closer than a brother to us. He didn't just leave Moab, he left heaven itself for you.

He came as the ultimate insider but was treated as the ultimate outsider. He didn't just give up marriage prospects for you, he gave up his very life for you.

You see, he was so committed to bringing you to himself, to showing you his kindness, that he set his face towards Jerusalem and Peter tries to tell him, turn back, don't come back, don't do this and Jesus says, he rebukes Peter and says, no, I'm going to the cross for you.

[34 : 46] You see, he says, where you should go, I will go. Where you should die, I will die instead of you. So that the judgment and the punishment of God goes on me, not on you.

You're not alone. Because when he rose and ascended to his father, he sent his spirit to us and he says, I will never leave you. I will never leave you as an orphan.

God is with us and God is for us. So, if God is for us and God is with us, this week, you may have choices and moments where you're going to be tempted to be bitter.

You have a choice whether you trust or you get bitter. But if Jesus is so committed to you, so kind to you that he would die for you, don't you realize that you can trust him in your life with whatever you're going through right now to work out his redemption plan because there are three more chapters left and he sees a bigger story and he's weaving your story into his story.

See, he wants to bring you the barley harvest, the barley harvest of knowing him. Every day this week, faith will be a matter of a battle to remember his kindness to you.

[36 : 13] It doesn't matter whether you chose not to grow bitter last week when you looked on Facebook and did other things, you talked to your colleagues. This week's a new week. You can choose to be bitter or to trust.

this is the fight of faith but God calls you to consider the kindness he's showing to you most beautifully at the cross.

You see, my friend who was in hospital in the midst of her darkness, she chose to refuse bitterness and to run to God and do you know what she told me?

When I felt everything was stripped away, my hope was gone, I found hope in God. I have never experienced such a closeness with God before.

When God is all you have, you discover that God is all you need. We sing about God's goodness, we say, I know God loves me but often that's just left up here.

[37 : 10] Sometimes God will bring you through circumstances because he wants to show the kindness to go from here down to here so that you can truly sing, God is sovereign in my life and God is kind in my life and my story is hidden in his story and he is working out his great purposes and plans and he will get the glory.

He's what you need for whatever you're going through right now. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, I just pray.

I know there are some people here who life has been hard. Health, work, relationships and Lord, there are some people here who have grown weary and are wondering whether you really are good because sometimes you felt a long way away.

I pray that you'd help them to lift their eyes and to see your kindness in the little things and in the big things. I pray, Lord, for those of us who right now are actually, we're happy in Moab.

We're happy just finding our satisfaction in all kinds of other things, Lord, but I pray that you'd show us that those things are empty, that they're not going to, they're not going to satisfy.

[38 : 59] Show us that we need to run back to you and when we run back, we're not faced with a God who's just looking to just grudgingly accept us but we're looking at a God who is desperately wooing us back to yourself.

I pray, make us, those who learn how to fight this week, to remember your goodness and to trust you and to see your great love for us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.