

When Tragedy Strikes

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 January 2025

Preacher: Oscar Chow

- [0 : 0 0] So today's reading will be from the book of Ruth, chapter 1, verse 1 to 22. So if you guys could follow along in your Bibles, your bulletin, or the screen behind me, that'd be great.
- And starting in verse 1, we read, In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And a man of Bethlehem and Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.
- The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi. And the names of his two sons were Malon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem and Judah.
- They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died. And she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives.
- The name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Malon and Kilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.
- [1 : 0 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. 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.
- 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.
- 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. And they said to her, No, we will return with you to your people.
- 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? 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, would you therefore wait till they were grown?
- [2 : 1 8] Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter for me, for your sake, that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. Then they lifted up their voices and wept again.
- And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law.
- But Ruth said, Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go. 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 I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts me from you. And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said, No more.

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 woman said, Is this Naomi? She said to them, Do not call me Naomi.

[3 : 29] 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?

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.

This is the word of God. Thanks, Jaya. Well, good morning, and happy new year to some of you, if you just got back to Hong Kong recently.

My name is Oscar, and I am one of the elders here at Watermark. And today, I am very, very excited, because we are diving into this beautiful book of Ruth.

And maybe you know this book. Maybe you've read it a few times. Maybe you're following us at Watermark. We are doing the Bible reading plan, and we've just read the first two chapters of Ruth.

[4 : 32] Or perhaps you have no clue at all what this book is about. Well, Ruth has been called the most beautiful short story ever written.

It's only four chapters, but inside these pages, it really packs a punch. Ruth is a love story. It's a love story between Ruth and Boaz.

It's also a love story between Ruth and Naomi. But even more so, this is a love story between God and humanity. The overarching theme of Ruth is that God desires to display his loving kindness to save and redeem all people.

Now, what also makes Ruth so relatable is that it's about ordinary life. There's no king. There's no army.

There's no national event. The stuff that happens in the book, it's about a few simple people experiencing the ups and the downs of everyday life, marriage, relationships, hunger, poverty, love, and death.

[5 : 51] And woven through it all is God who quietly intervenes intervenes in the lives of people to display his loving kindness and ultimately his great redemption.

Ruth is a picture of the gospel. It's a picture of the great love of Jesus Christ. And so today, we'll kick off in Ruth chapter one.

As Jaya read so eloquently, this chapter starts off with Naomi losing everything. She faces great tragedy and loss. Everything she held dear was taken from her.

But in the face of such tragedy, we will see that God provides hope because there's always hope if we trust the God of the Bible.

So let's look at Ruth chapter one in three parts. First, tragedy strikes. Second, a glimmer of hope. And third, the faith of a believer.

[6 : 56] Let's pray together. Father, as we consider your word, as we come under your word, and as we honor you today, Lord, understanding and learning about this chapter of Ruth, open our hearts, God.

open our hearts and our minds. Allow us, Lord, to get the essence of what you're trying to say to us, God. Help us to put ourselves in the shoes of the characters to feel their pain, but also, Lord, to see that you are working in their lives.

Even when we don't see you, you're working in our lives. I pray for great encouragement today for all of us here. Help me, God, as I speak.

Help me to speak clearly with good diction so that people can understand what you're trying to say to us. In Jesus' name, Amen. So in the Bible, Ruth is right after the book of Judges.

And the very last verse of Judges describes the setting in which Ruth was in. In those days, there was no king in Israel.

[8 : 02] Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. During the time of Judges and the time of Ruth, there was complete moral depravity in Israel.

Immorality, self-indulgence, self-exaltation were rampant. If you wanted your neighbor's property, you just stole it. If you desire your neighbor's spouse, you just acted out those carnal desires without any care for your fellow man or any care for God.

And as a result, God's judgment fell on Israel and God caused a famine in the land. And it was in that context that we read in Ruth chapter 1 verse 1 that a man from Bethlehem in Judah named Elimelech, he makes the decision to leave Judah.

He leaves God's people. He leaves God's land. And he takes his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Malon and Kilion, to a neighboring nation called Moab to try to find food.

But the Moabites were pagan worshipers and there was a lot of bad blood between Israel and Moab that went back years and years. So it was not a friendly environment for this Jewish family to enter into.

[9 : 27] But then in Moab, the uncomfortable dream descends into a nightmare. We don't know how or why, but Elimelech dies.

Can you imagine a worse situation for Naomi to be in? You're in a foreign country, the people are hostile to you, and then out of nowhere you lose your husband. And as if mourning the loss of your beloved husband wasn't enough, she had to face the loss of her security and protection and her social standing.

For in those days, a woman, her standing in society was really based on her husband. But then, it gets worse for Naomi.

Her two sons, Malon and Kilion, they marry Moabite wives, but after about 10 years, Naomi's sons die as well. So not only does Naomi lose her lover and her husband, she loses her protection, identity, security, social standing, loses her sons.

And not just that, but with their deaths, the deaths of her sons, her family's name would cease to exist. Her family's name would be wiped out, wiped out.

[10 : 43] For without a son, Elimelech's line would end. So both in her present circumstances and looking into the future, Naomi was utterly crushed. And I don't think anyone can really blame her for how she responds to this tragedy.

If we fast forward just for a moment to the end of Ruth chapter 1, Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem and the whole town was stirred. The people there were gathering around, wondering what happened to Elimelech and Malon and Kilion trying to understand what happened to that decade or so that they were there in Moab.

And Naomi tells them. She doesn't mince words. She tells the woman of the town in verses 20 and 21, Do not call me Naomi, which means pleasant.

Call me Mara, which means bitter. 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? Naomi was in a dark place. She lost everything.

[12 : 01] Her husband, sons, security protection, her assets, her standing in society, everything she held dear, gone. Now maybe you think Naomi is being a bad witness to Ruth.

After all, Naomi being from the Jewish people, she should know the Bible, the stories of how God is always faithful and always provides. God's always so good to his people.

Shouldn't Naomi know that? Why is she still so negative? Now, by no means is Naomi the model Jew or a model Christian in the way she responds to such tragedy.

But, as I read Ruth, I see beauty in Naomi's response in two ways. The first is that Naomi, Naomi is being real.

Tragedies happen to all of us. We will all face suffering. But it's okay not to have to force yourself to be unemotive or to pretend that everything is okay.

[13 : 04] In the Bible, we read, especially in Psalms, that there's a place and a way for us to process pain and suffering and all the confusion around it through what the Bible calls lamenting.

If you live long enough, you will face suffering. But as God's people, we can be real with God. With God directly through prayer. We can be real with our church community.

And if you are part of this church, we will do our best to come alongside you if you're facing suffering. And second, Naomi holds on to God's sovereignty.

It may seem like Naomi is quite negative. She does change her name from pleasant to bitter. But if you read the text closely, she never once curses God.

She never once rejects God's sovereignty. She never loses her faith in God. She never denies that God's in control with the power to do as He pleases.

[14 : 06] In fact, Naomi's stance is that God is in control. God is sovereign. God can do whatever He desires. He's dealt me a bad hand. But God is in control.

He can do what He pleases because He's God. You see, for the Christian, the fork in the road of suffering often looks like this. Life is going just fine.

The sun is shining. We're all making money. We're all having children. But then, boom, one day, life smashes us in the face. Tragedy strikes and our faith is put to the test.

And in response, we can follow either one of two paths. The first path starts with bitterness against God. But it doesn't end there.

Bitterness leads down the road of rejecting God's sovereignty. We stop trusting Him. We lose our faith in Him. Maybe we even leave our church community.

[15 : 07] And that is a very dangerous road to go down because it can often descend into sin and depravity because nothing ever good can happen apart from God.

The second road, the second path, may start with lamenting, but then it leads to the decision to continue to hope in God, to continue to press on into God.

But it's often not a V-shaped recovery. It's often not a simple, fast microwave fix. The road can be hard. It often will be hard.

It's long. It's difficult. There'll be ups and downs. But in the midst of it, God's word and God's people will remind us that God is good.

And if we hang on to the hope that He is good, that one day in eternity, our suffering won't just end. Our suffering would be replaced with eternal joy as we are in heaven with our Lord Jesus.

[16 : 15] And Naomi, I believe, takes a second path. It isn't an easy path, but Naomi never gives up hope because if you always have hope in God, the God of the Bible, you're in a good place.

And that glimmer of hope appears. Starting in verse 6, we read that one day as Naomi was going about her day faithfully working in the fields of Moab to provide food for herself, Ruth, and Orpah, she hears that God had visited His people and given them food.

God had intervened and ended the famine back in Bethlehem. A bit of sunshine is peering through those dark clouds. So the three ladies, they packed their stuff and set out on the three-day journey back to Bethlehem.

But on the way, Naomi turns to Ruth and Orpah. She does this sensible thing and she says to them, stay back in Moab. Verses 8 and 9, 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. The Lord grant that you may find rest each of you in the house of her husband. Again, Naomi, in spite of the despair that she faces, she acknowledges that it's the Lord who grants kindness.

[17 : 47] It's the Lord who grants rest. She acknowledges that God is sovereign and she prays this blessing over Ruth and Orpah expecting them to do the logical thing to stay in Moab.

Naomi knows that logically, right, there will be a much higher chance for Ruth and Orpah to find rest back in Moab. This rest that Naomi speaks about refers to the two remarrying in Moab, perhaps starting a family, perhaps having a son to carry on the family line for that is what was most important for a woman back in those days.

For it would be highly unlikely that anyone in Bethlehem would want to marry a foreigner, a Moabite. And Orpah does a sensible thing.

She kisses Naomi, says her goodbyes, and stays in Moab. But Ruth, Ruth makes the opposite, the irrational, the illogical decision to go with Naomi back to Bethlehem.

Verse 14, but Ruth clung to her. Ruth clung to Naomi. Imagine it, in the middle of the road on the way to Bethlehem, Ruth grabs on to Naomi.

[19 : 09] Naomi tries again to do the sensible thing. Hey, stay back in Moab. You're ridiculous coming with me. But Ruth is resolute. She's unyielding. She's stubborn.

In verses 16 and 17, the most well-known verses in the book of Ruth, Ruth tells Naomi, it's beautiful, 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. And here, the first, I think the most prominent, and perhaps the most surprising love story of Ruth begins.

The love story between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. I see some wives here laughing like it's funny. But isn't it true, though, that the relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law is often the most tense or at least the most awkward of all human relationships?

[20 : 28] I see some like nodding, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, I've experienced that, yes. But in Naomi's deepest moment, when she was completely empty, with all that she loved taken from her, still, there was hope.

Naomi didn't know it yet, but that glimmer of hope, that wasn't just God providing food back in Bethlehem, it was so much more. God had intervened and brought her Ruth, the most unlikely friend and helper, who, we will see in future chapters, risks her life in a display of love for Naomi.

Naomi's journey from emptiness to fullness was about to begin. Now, I do want to acknowledge that some of us in this room have experienced unspeakable tragedy, even as horrific as what Naomi has experienced.

The loss of a mother or father, father, there's never enough time. The loss of a child, it will crush your soul, or the loss of your beloved spouse.

And all of us here, probably in some shape or form, have experienced some sort of suffering, because if you live long enough, you will face suffering, because suffering is part of the human condition.

[21 : 57] But as we consider Naomi's tragedy, we see that in the midst of the darkness, God intervened and gave Naomi hope.

And so whatever you're going through, and whatever you may go through down the road, or whatever messiness exists in your life, if you love and trust Christ, there is always hope.

Ruth clung to Naomi, clung to her, picture it, it makes no sense, just go back to Moab, you'll find a husband, start a family, you'll be comfortable there. But Ruth was standing firm, telling Naomi, whatever the cost, however long it takes, wherever it takes me, I will cling to you and I will love you.

I will go to the ends of the earth to love you, and where you're buried, I will also be buried. As if saying that even in death, death cannot part me from you.

And to express the seriousness of her promise, she even invokes a curse upon herself if she fails to keep her word. Verse 17, we just read it.

[23 : 05] May the Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts me from you. And like Ruth, God's love for us is and never was logical.

biblical. Jesus died for sinners. Jesus died for us when we were worshipping all the things of this world, money, power, pleasures, comforts.

Jesus died for us in effect when we hated him. Ruth, she was serious about her commitment to cling to Naomi. She invoked that curse.

But on the cross, Christ took that curse of sin upon himself. because of his love for you. Because of his irrational love for you.

And isn't irrational love, isn't irrational love what we crave or desire? Not conditional love. Not circumstantial love. Not a summer fling. I love that my wife, Celeste, says she's crazy about me sometimes.

[24 : 13] But isn't crazy love what we desire? Crazy love, crazy, irrational, illogical, long-suffering, long-standing, permanent, forever love.

That is what we desire, isn't it? If that is you, then know Jesus. Experience his love. There's nothing like it in this world.

I've lost my place now, sorry. And so for Ruth, without knowing that much about the God of Israel, this Moabite outsider had the faith to cling on to Naomi, return with her back to Bethlehem, even though the odds would suggest she would have very low chance of ever finding security or a husband in Bethlehem.

If that isn't faith, I don't know what is. Now here's a question. Like Orpah, Ruth could have walked away from Naomi, and no one would have blamed her.

She was still young. She could have remarried, had a family, and had a comfortable life in Moab. Why does Ruth cling to Naomi? Why does Ruth place her bets, so to speak, all in on Naomi?

[25 : 33] Was Naomi an amazing leader? Was Naomi going to provide her food and protection and security? Did Ruth owe a debt to Naomi? Of course, no.

None of these things at all. You see, Ruth wasn't putting her hope in Naomi at all. Her love for Naomi, which throughout the four chapters of Ruth beautifully blossoms and grows, is driven by her faith in the God of the Bible.

Ruth makes this profound commitment to Naomi. In verse 16, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Doesn't that sound a lot like the covenant commitment that God made to his people Israel throughout the Old Testament?

What did God say to his people? You'll be my people, and I will be your God. You see, it wasn't like God had abandoned Naomi, and Ruth stepped in to take God's place.

Rather, in Ruth's loving commitment to Naomi, we actually see God's loving commitment to Naomi. And so we can see how God is behind it, providing a glimmer of hope to Naomi, and showing that he is at work in the midst of despair.

[26 : 53] It's likely that Ruth heard of the God of Israel through Naomi. Perhaps Naomi shared how the God of Israel, he took Abraham out of paganism, and made an everlasting promise to Abraham.

Perhaps Naomi shared how the God of Israel, through Moses, delivered and rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, and gave them their own land. Perhaps Naomi shared how the God of Israel is forever faithful, forever kind, forever loving, forever designed to rescue and redeem his people.

Now, Naomi was far from the model Jew, yes. She was bitter after losing so much. But she never turned her back on God, and God still used her, as God can use anyone to bring another person to faith in him.

And so it was likely that Ruth came to faith in God through Naomi. And it was Ruth's conversion from a pagan Moabite, an enemy of God's people, to faith in the God of Israel.

That drove her conviction to begin a new life, following, trusting, and obeying the God of Israel. And where would that road lead her?

[28 : 15] To Judah, to Bethlehem. Bethlehem. Because in Moab, although there may have been comfort and security, there was no God.

The Lord, the Almighty, the true God that made the heavens and the earth, he wasn't in Moab. He was back in the land of Israel.

And so to follow the God of Israel, Ruth knew she had to return with Naomi back to Bethlehem. And so Ruth, she intentionally chose a life following God with the overwhelming likelihood of permanent poverty, widowhood, and prejudice.

You see, in the face of Naomi's suffering, Ruth herself chose suffering to mitigate Naomi's suffering. It's a lot of suffering.

In the face of Naomi's suffering, I'll say it again, in the face of Naomi's suffering, Ruth herself chose suffering to mitigate Naomi's suffering. A picture of Jesus, isn't it?

[29 : 25] Isn't that what Jesus did? In the face of our potential eternal damnation to hell, Jesus took our place, he came into the world, and he clung to us, and he went to the cross, and he suffered there so that we wouldn't have to.

Now, looking back at Ruth, what an example of someone who lives by faith. And friends, isn't this what God calls us to do as his people?

To live by faith? The righteous will live by faith. Romans 1 to 16. For without faith, it's impossible to please God.

Hebrews chapter 11. But, we're a people that always demand to know everything that's going to happen before it happens in order to believe it.

And we must see something right in front of us. We're a people also that naturally drive away from radical, risky decisions towards comfortable, easy decisions.

[30 : 32] I know that's me. I'd much rather go fly with my family short haul to Cebu. It's only two hours than fly long haul to overseas. I just don't want to deal with the difficulty.

Partly, I think it's because I'm very privileged. I think we're all very privileged living in Hong Kong. We get out our phone. If you want pizza, get out my phone.

I just use my thumb, click three buttons, boom, pizza at my door, 20 minutes. But I believe God is calling us to follow Ruth's example.

To live by faith. And not just do what is logical. And not just do what is in our own best interest. And for some of us here, living by faith, maybe that means loving someone that you really don't like to love or don't want to love.

Maybe it's your mother-in-law. Maybe it's your colleague. Maybe it's your CG member. To love someone like Ruth loved Naomi.

[31 : 40] For some of us here, maybe God is calling us to reorient our ambitions. I think for a lot of us, money and career drive our decisions.

Perhaps God is calling us to finally put him above everything else. I think for all of us, partly what it means to live by faith is giving money back to God.

For all of us. I know it's hard. For some of us, maybe it means giving more money away back to God. All are called to live by faith.

To obey God. To honor God above all. Even when it's radical and not logical. And maybe you're here today and you're not a Christian.

Think about this. The journey of life is like sailing out in the open sea. Maybe right now, the sun is shining. The sea is calm.

[32 : 42] But you're at the mercy of the wind, the waves, and the rain. At some point, a storm will come. At some point, tragedy will be a little strike because this world is decaying.

Because this world is not all there is. The question is, what is your anchor? What is your, what will save you?

What is your hope? If you put your life and trust in Jesus, you will always find hope. God intervenes in the lives of the lives of Naomi and Ruth to do only what God can do.

He always brings restoration. He always brings life from despair and death. And for all of us, with hindsight, we can see that God has already intervened, sending Jesus into the world to die on the cross.

And because of him, we have an eternal hope that nothing in this world could ever take away. Not famine, not natural disasters, not war, not an economic depression, not even death can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus.

[34 : 07] Let me close. Ruth 1 ends with Naomi and Ruth arriving in Bethlehem right at the beginning of the barley harvest.

After such tragedy, a glimmer of hope will turn into something more tangible and real. There will be uncertainty, there will be much risk, faith will be needed, but as we continue to look at the book of Ruth, we will see that both Naomi and Ruth, who began the story destitute and broken, will be more blessed, will experience more of the favor and kindness of God than they could ever imagine in their wildest dreams.

And we'll also see how this little story of Ruth is part of the biggest story that was ever told, the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. This is how the God of the Bible works.

He takes people like us, broken, messy, sinful, and if we only have the strength and resolve to humble ourselves, to admit that we can't do it ourselves, to admit that we are broken.

God always showers us with kindness and favor. And so this week, as we go out into our city, whatever may smash us in the face, whatever trials we're going through, let's cling on to God.

[35 : 52] Let's cling on to His every word. There's always hope in Christ. peace. And may we be a people who live radically by faith.

Let's pray. Father, thank you so much that we can study this book of the Bible. Your word, your holy word.

Thank you, God, that after a thousand years, it still speaks to us just as powerfully as it did back then, because it is your scripture.

God, as we respond to this, and today, now, and throughout the week, we think about our own trials in life, we think about the despair that we think about the idols that we have in life, Lord.

I pray, God, that you would cause us to see, Lord, there's always a glimmer of hope as we trust Christ. Help us to cling on to you, Jesus, and to never let go.

[36 : 56] For those of us here that have not yet put our hope in you, God, I pray, God, that you would speak to us directly. Speak to us as only you can, God, and may we all be a people, God, that love and trust you.

Thank you. Thank you for Jesus, your son. In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.