

Ruth 1 3rd November 2024

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

I love the smell of baking bread, and the taste of a fresh, warm loaf just out of the oven! Like many others during lock down Michael got into baking sourdough...which was delicious! I also have liked to bake my own bread, usually with a bread maker. I would be very disappointed if I ever became coeliac or wheat intolerant! Bread is a basic, staple, and tasty food.

Can you imagine what it would be like if our wheat crops didn't survive due to drought or misfortune?

I would miss my daily bread, but today we probably wouldn't starve, because we have so many other food options both locally and imported.

However, in the time when the book of Ruth was written, if the wheat crops failed it led to famine in the land. How devastating this was in the small town of Bethlehem, especially as the meaning of the name Bethlehem is 'house of bread'!

I love this little book of Ruth in the Old Testament, not just because it is my namesake! It is a book about ordinary people, in ordinary but trying times, it's a book about a lack of bread...an emptiness, a barrenness in people's lives. A book about God's providence, of his loving kindness and faithfulness being shown through the lives of ordinary people. A book that offers hope and moves from emptiness to fullness. A book that points to the coming of Jesus – one who truly redeems and fill our emptiness.

And all this in a mere 4 chapters! Over the next few weeks we will delve into this little gem of Ruth.

Background

What is the setting of this story? The opening line tells us that it is set in the *days when the Judges ruled and there was famine in the land.*

It was the worst of times. If you've forgotten the story of Judges, it was a grim period in the lives of the Israelites. After the Exodus, they had eventually come to the promised land, but once settled there, they didn't necessarily follow the Lord's commands that he had clearly laid out to them through

Moses. Rather they were generally swayed by the other nations, following other gods, looking after themselves and as is oft repeated throughout the book of Judges the people *did evil in the eyes of the Lord*... There was civil unrest, violence, social disintegration, sexual immorality, assault and so on...

There were pockets of good people and times of repentance, but the last line of Judges sums up the situation well...*In those days Israel had no King; everyone did as they saw fit.*

Add to this we are told there was famine in the land. It is in this setting that the book of Ruth follows the journey of one family. Their trials, pain, grief, emptiness and how God orders their footsteps and brings hope and joy and fullness.

In the first chapter we read of how a certain man, named Elimelek, decided to leave the famine in Bethlehem with his wife Naomi and their two sons to seek a better life in Moab. To find employment, to find bread to fill them.

However, if you know anything about Moab, this was perhaps not the wisest decision of Elimelek's. Moab was populated by the descendants of Lot, they were unfriendly and worst of all they worshipped the god Chemosh – to whom human sacrifice was made. The Moabites had invaded the Israelites in the past and we read in Deuteronomy and Judges that Moabites were not to be admitted to the congregation of Israelites. Moab seems an interesting choice for a family from Bethlehem to go and live in.

In the next paragraph we read that indeed it did not turn out well for Elimelek, and we don't know why, but he died. The two sons married Moabite women and after about 10 years, they die also (again we don't know the circumstances). Both couples seemed to have infertility issues as they have no children.

Naomi is now left in this foreign land, with no husband, no sons, and no grandchildren. Just two widowed daughters in law.

What a terrible situation. What pain and grief. Who knows what would have happened if Naomi had stayed there? Women had no rights without a husband or son. They were their husband's possession. Widows were very vulnerable, hence God's special commands to his people to look after

widows, orphans, and children. Widows were one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

While Elimelek seems to have made an unwise decision in moving to Moab, his widow Naomi makes a wise decision to return to Bethlehem. We see God's hand at work as Naomi hears *that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them*. It seems the famine was breaking.

She sets off with her daughters in law Orpah and Ruth, but despite her terrible situation and isolation she thinks of them and their plight and encourages them to return to their home and find new husbands, with the hope of having children and a better life than coming with her where they would be marginalized foreigners themselves.

There was obviously a great love between these women as they weep and protest. Orpah is convinced to return home, but Ruth vows allegiance to Naomi. She is prepared to leave her home and her god's and be tied to Naomi even unto death. We can only imagine that Naomi had remained faithful to God and witnessed to her daughter's in law over the years. Ruth desires for Naomi's people to be her people, Naomi's God to be her God. She is adamant that she is not leaving Naomi.

And so, they travel on together.

When they arrive in Bethlehem it seems there is much excitement. It is many years since Naomi had left with her family and they barely recognize her and question – is this Naomi?

We then hear just how Naomi is feeling about her situation.

Don't call me Naomi...call be Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.

The name Naomi means 'pleasant, lovely, delightful', but Mara means 'bitter'. Naomi is not afraid to share the depth of her emotional state and like we often do when things are going wrong, she blames God for her current situation. She expresses her emptiness.

However, she does say that God brought her back. And in fact, she did not come back empty...she returned *accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter n law*. Sometimes in the midst of our pain and grief we do not see the positives and goodness around us.

We are left at the end of Chapter 1 with a note of hope. Naomi had returned home with Ruth, and they were arriving in *Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning*.

As we journey through this little story over the next few weeks, I pray you will see how God is involved in every aspect of our lives. How he cares for us when we are feeling empty – how he longs to fill us. How his character is displayed through ordinary faithful people as they live out their lives. How even during dark times, like the days of Judges, (or in the middle of a pandemic, or even war in the middle east) there is always hope and light.

We will also see God's bigger story being played out in the background of this little story...

We will see how this Old Testament book points to Jesus.

You may find that you identify with one or more with the characters in this story. I hope you will be encouraged to be honest with how you are feeling before God – even if it's bitterness, grief, and disappointment with how life has turned out. I pray that you will let him in to fill you with his loving kindness. I pray we may be challenged to see how character and behaviour reflects God's character, to see how our everyday lives may be used by God for his greater purpose.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, we thank you for this little book of Ruth that carries a big message of who you are and how you care for and use every day, ordinary people for your purposes. How you give hope and lift the marginalized in society.

May we be challenged and encouraged to develop more of your character in our lives that we may be a blessing to others. And Lord when we are in despair, may we like Naomi be honest to you and others, may we fix our eyes on you and be restored with hope and filled with your goodness and grace.

In your son's loving name, we pray. Amen.