



Hope For the Hurting

Advent – Part 1

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—let me invite you to open with me to Ruth 1. After reading through the whole Story of Scripture over the last year, I thought, what do you do after that? As I was praying through where we might go in God’s Word in these three weeks leading up to Christmas, my mind was drawn to my favorite book in the Old Testament, the book of Ruth.

I love this book of the Bible and I’m hoping that over the next three short weeks you will grow to love it as well and that you will see how it leads us in a surprising way right to a stable in Bethlehem. Ruth has all the elements of a love story: tragedy, loss, despair, hope, triumph, loyalty, romance. So husbands, you have no need to take your wives or girlfriends to a romantic movie during the month of December. Just bring them to worship and it will be a date.

But it’s more than just a love story. It’s a story within a story. It’s a story, not just about Ruth, but a story about us. It’s a story about how God takes unsuspecting people in surprising ways from despair to delight, from hurt to hope, even amidst life’s darkest times. Which is where the book begins.

We have a couple challenges when we come to the book of Ruth. One is how to read it, because it’s really intended to be read in one sitting, but we’re going to split it up over three weeks. So what do we do? Do we go ahead and see what happens at the end of the book? Or do we take it step by step? Really, we could go either way, but here’s the route I’m choosing. We’re going step by step. We’re not going to talk about chapter two or three or four today. We’re going to stay in chapter one.

Now, it would help us to understand chapter one if we knew all of chapter four. But I want us to feel what the original readers felt when they heard this story. Specifically here in chapter one, I want us to feel the weight of despair without softening it by turning to the end of the book and seeing how everything is resolved. For those of you who read novels and start by reading the last few pages of the book so you know where everything is going, this is not going to be your style. You’re going to be left hanging today and you won’t get more until next Sunday. But it’s really not going to come together until the Sunday after that.

The second challenge is the fact that you and I don’t have the benefit of hearing this story in its original language. The author of the book of Ruth—we’re not sure who that is—is brilliant. The author uses literary devices beautifully throughout the book, some of which we can catch, but others we simply

can't see because we're not reading it or hearing it read as it was originally written and intended to be read. For example, there are times when a point is emphasized through the use of alliteration in the Hebrew. There's a staccato-like style where the author describes certain events using certain words that we just don't catch in the English translation.

So I want to do something a little differently than we normally do each week. Instead of just reading through the Scripture here at the start, I want us to read it slowly, pausing along the way. I want to point out some of the details the Holy Spirit has inspired the author to write, in order to help us get a deeper grasp on the beauty of the story. Basically, I want to tell this story well, so start here in verse one and move slowly. Keep in mind this is only one of two books in the Bible named after a woman. The other is Esther. This is the only book in the Old Testament named after someone who is not Jewish. So we know from the start this book is unique.

With that set-up, let's read verse one. The Bible says:

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.

This is where we get a glimpse into the time period in which this story takes place. In fact, hold your place here in Ruth and turn back in your Bible to the Table of Contents. I want to remind you where this story fits into the Story of Scripture we have read over the last year. If you look at the first 17 books in the Old Testament, those books basically give us the history of the Old Testament.

The first five, Genesis through Deuteronomy, tell the story of God's people leading up to the Promised Land. Then the books of Joshua and Judges tell the story of God's people taking over and settling in the Promised Land. Joshua and Judges are fairly chronological, but then Ruth spotlights a story that happened during the middle of Judges—most scholars think it was somewhere around Judges 10. The same thing happens later, when you get to Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. Ezra and Nehemiah happen pretty much chronologically, then Esther highlights a story that happened during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

So the book of Ruth happened during the time of Judges in the Promised Land. If we come back to Ruth and turn one page to the left, you'll see the very end of the book of Judges. In Judges 21:25, we get a summary of this time period. It says, *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* That was not a good thing. The people of God were indulging in all kinds of immorality and idolatry. It was a dark time.

It was made even worse, as we read in Ruth 1:1, by the fact that there was a famine in Bethlehem. Most of us here don't know what famine is like. We have no idea what it means to be truly without food, not knowing if you will have enough to live or that your children will have enough to live. It means

literally starving. Sometimes when we're hungry we'll say, "I'm starving." But ladies and gentlemen, we are not starving. Far from it.

What's even more interesting is the word "Bethlehem" means "house of bread." So the picture here is that the house of bread has no bread. As a result, this Jewish man leaves Bethlehem to go to Moab. As soon as we hear "Moab," we need to realize that this is not just a foreign land geographically. Moab is a foreign land spiritually and historically. Back in Genesis 19, the Moabites began when Lot had an incestuous relationship with his daughter. Moabites were an outcast people from the start.

Then they resisted the Israelites in the book of Numbers when the Israelites wanted to pass through their land. Also, the women of Moab had seduced Jewish men into sexual immorality and idolatry, which resulted in 24,000 Israelites dying. They worshiped false gods and in Deuteronomy 23 God said, "No Moabite can enter into the assembly of the Lord, down to the tenth generation." They were an accursed people. So for a Jewish man to go to Moab was shameful, to say the least. It was like he was turning his back on God.

Now, verse two:

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.

Side note here: Elimelech's name means "God is King." Think about it. This was a time when the judges ruled and there was no king, there was a clear announcement from the beginning of the story that God is King. Now, these next verses we are about to read introduce tragedy into the heart of the story. As I mentioned earlier, the language here in the Hebrew has sort of a staccato style. It is terse, quick and almost unfeeling. We don't have any details, we don't have emotion—just cold, hard, blunt, heavy facts.

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.

There is it. In a matter of three verses, you have ten years of torrential tragedy. And just like that, this family of four Israelites is down to one. First, Elimelech, the leader of the family who brought them to this strange land dies. Naomi is left as a widow raising two sons. The two sons marry Moabite women. Keep in mind the history there. Moabite women were the ones who seduced Israelite men into idolatry and immorality. They were not even allowed into the assembly of the Lord.

On top of this shame, after ten years, Naomi's sons Mahlon and Chilion both die. We're not sure if they died at the same time, one soon after the other, or what happened. But probably unexpected, so in many ways—as far as we know—this was an undeserved tragedy in Naomi's life. The tragedy is only heightened by the fact that now Naomi is left, not only without her husband and her sons and finds herself

with two Moabite daughters-in-law, neither of whom had any heir to carry on their family. That was the curse of all curses. In the ancient Near East, particularly in Israel, there was no greater tragedy than for a family to cease to exist.

This sets up the ultimate problem in the book of Ruth, because Naomi's family now teeters on extinction. To emphasize this, when we get to verse five, notice that the author doesn't even mention Naomi's name. *"The woman was left without her two sons and her husband."* It's like Naomi has lost her identity. She's an aged widow with two barren daughters-in-law from Moab. She has no hope, no security, no home, no provision—nothing. If we don't feel the weight of this, then we will miss the wonder of verse six. At a time when this suffering woman and her two foreign daughters-in-law find themselves in utter hopelessness, verse six says:

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.

"The Lord." This is the first time God is mentioned. Yahweh has visited His people with aid. He has restored Bethlehem to the house of bread it was intended to be. This is one of those verses that has figurative alliteration that just brightly jumps off the page in the backdrop of the dark verses that precede it. Then verse seven says:

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.

Now, listen to what Naomi says to her daughters-in-law on their way. Keep in mind this is the first dialogue we see in the book. Some of the most important facets of the book of Ruth are going to happen in dialogue. The author uses specific, intentional conversations in over half the book to communicate the point of the story. So pay attention closely whenever you see these profound conversations take place. Up until this point, over ten years have passed, people have died, barrenness and hopelessness have sunk in, but nobody has even said a word in the story until verse eight:

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!"

This is more than just, "Goodbye and God bless you." She thanks them for their kindness to her. You can only imagine what these three women have been through together. Ruth and Orpah have left their own people to marry Israelite men. They're now set apart from the Moabites. Both of them have lived for years in barrenness, without children, only to then see their husbands die. These three women have lived, struggled, cried and mourned together for years.

Naomi turns to bless them and free them up from any responsibility they felt they had toward her. Naomi says, “You deserve better. You deserve husbands and a family—not to be stuck with me, an aged widow with nothing.” You can imagine the emotion when the rest of verse nine continues:

⁹ 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.”

Picture it. They’re weeping together, then as Naomi speaks, the weeping grows as the three of them consider not being together. As a sign of continued kindness to Naomi, they say, “No, we will go with you.” Naomi responds basically by building an argument for why they should stay and not go with her. Listen to her reasoning. It’s pretty solid.

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.”

If they stay in Moab, they can find another husband, have a family and live happily ever after. But if they come with Naomi, they’ll have nothing. We’ve got to understand the picture here of why Naomi starts talking about the fact that she has no more sons. In Deuteronomy 5:5-10, provision is made for situations like this. If there was a childless widow, then the brother of the husband would take her under his care and provide for her in his family. So if Naomi had other sons, they could provide for Orpah and Ruth.

The problem is Naomi has no more sons. She doesn’t even have a husband. Even if she did have a husband and were to have another son that day, Orpha and Ruth could never wait long enough to be cared for by her son. Naomi is basically saying to them, “There’s no hope for me and there will be no hope for you if you come with me.” It’s even heightened there in the last sentence when she says to them, “Obviously the Lord’s hand is against me.” The implication is, “If you stay with me, the Lord’s hand will also be against you. Why would you want to go with me?”

To be honest, when I’ve read this before, I’ve thought it almost sounded rude of Naomi. Does she not want them? But the reality at this point is that Naomi seems to be driven by kindness. She’s saying, “Stay here. Have a husband. Don’t tie up your lot with mine.” What was the effect of her speech?

¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Feel the emotion in this scene. As they’re weeping, Orpah walks away, but Ruth stays. And not just stays, she clings. It’s the same word used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the marriage bond, when a wife leaves her family to cleave—to cling to her husband. In the middle of the tears, Naomi says:

¹⁵ *“See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”*

Now the stage is set for one of the most memorable speeches in all of the Bible. Beauty, courage, commitment, devotion, love and loyalty are all wrapped up into one. Listen to what Ruth says:

¹⁶ *“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.”*

Wow! I find it interesting that these words are often used in wedding vows. They’re a pretty incredible picture of commitment, so if you used them in your wedding, that’s great. But the reality is this is a daughter-in-law speaking to a mother-in-law. Let me tell you what I’ve never seen in a wedding: speaking to your future in-laws like this!

The language is simple, yet profound. We can almost imagine Ruth loosening her embrace on Naomi, looking directly into her eyes and saying, “Don’t try to talk me out of this. I am committed to you. As your God is my witness, I’m committed to you and He will judge me if I break this commitment.” In a single moment, Ruth forsakes everything—her homeland, her people, her gods, her religion, her safety, her future, her destiny, her everything—to go with Naomi. This was not just for this life. There was an intimate connection in Near Eastern thought between where you were buried and what you thought about the afterlife. Ruth said, “I’m going to be buried with you, with your people, under your God.” This was the ultimate commitment, not just to Naomi, but to Naomi’s God.

Her words are so strong, so poignant, that they silenced Naomi—and we don’t hear another word until we get to Bethlehem. See how this silence on the road to Bethlehem sets the stage for a somewhat awkward entrance into Bethlehem.

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?”*

Just put yourself in Naomi’s shoes, as she walks into this city that years before her husband and their family had turned their backs on. They had left the Promised Land to retreat into a pagan land. Now she’s coming back, this time without her husband and without her sons. And not just without them, but she’s coming back with a Moabite woman by her side. The word is out. The town is shocked. “Is this Naomi?” Now, Naomi’s name means pleasant. So listen to what happens. As soon as they ask, “Is this the pleasant one?” Naomi responds in verse 20:

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?"

Imagine being one of these women who approaches Naomi. "Hey, you're back, Naomi!" She looks at you and says, "Naomi? Pleasant? Nothing could be further from the truth. My name is Bitter. I left this place full, with everything I loved and everything that was most important to me. But I have come back with nothing."

Now at this point I want you to put yourself in Ruth's shoes. Here's Naomi, standing in front of a group of people—with you by her side—saying to them, "I am bitter. I went away full, but I have come back with nothing." While listening to Naomi, these women's eyes turn to you and your face goes straight down. You are a picture of the bitterness the Almighty brings. You are a picture of calamity.

²² So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab.

Notice that the writer specifically says, "*Ruth the Moabite...who returned from the country of Moab.*" He didn't have to put that in there. But twice the author emphasizes that this is a Moabite woman, who finds herself in the middle of a strange land—for what can only become a very surprising purpose. What a story! And that's just chapter one.

Let's stop and think about the stage that has been set for us, that I believe leads to one clear, beautiful, glorious and life-transforming truth for you to take away today. You may wonder, "What is the point? What does all this have to do with me?" I want to show you what it has to do with you. When we think about the beginning of a story, we think about the scene, characters, themes and tensions that the author is setting up to be resolved in the end.

A story of two places

One place is the land of promise—Bethlehem, the house of bread—in the Promised Land that God has led His people to where they would experience His blessing as they trusted Him.

The other is a land of compromise, Moab, a land of foreign gods, where Elimelech takes his family, the land where Ruth was born. We have a book in the Bible named after a woman from Moab, the cursed land of compromise.

A story of two people

Ruth is a story of two places and two people. Obviously, there are many characters introduced in chapter one, but by the end of the chapter we're down to two: Naomi and Ruth. They seem so different. One is a woman with honest hurt. Our impression of Naomi at the end of chapter one may not be particularly positive, but we must not be too hard on her. Think of all she has been through: a famine, a

move to pagan Moab, the death of her husband, the marriage of her sons to foreign wives, the death of her sons—and no heir left at all. It has been blow after blow, tragedy after tragedy. She is hurting.

Don't miss that the writer is not pointing to any sin that Naomi has committed to bring her to this point. She had followed her husband, she cared for her sons, she cared for her daughters-in-law. It's not that she's perfect, but similar to the book of Job, this is a picture of the real yet often mysterious nature of suffering that leads us to the question, "Why?" I love how the Bible does not pretty this scene up. I love the honesty we see here. God's Word does not gloss over life like it's easy and simple, when the reality is we know it's often tough and hard.

In Naomi's words referring to herself as Mara are harsh, but they're honest. Let me ask, do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel like life has been hard on you? Do you ever feel like you can't take it anymore, like it's been one thing after another? This is a woman with honest hurt that I'm guessing many people in this gathering can identify with, if we're honest and refuse to do what we're tempted to do. We just come into church and put on a face, pretending like everything is perfect, when it's not.

Naomi is a woman with honest hurt and on the other hand, Ruth is a woman with humble devotion. The more you look back at verses 16 and 17 in chapter one, the more awesome they are. Ruth has left everything that's familiar to her—her land, her family—and she's entering into a life that looks like perpetual widowhood and childlessness. She's going to a new land filled with prejudice against her and she's going to be there for better or for worse. She's going to be buried there. The ultimate commitment is found right in the center of her words. Intentionally in the center of Ruth's words are these: "Your God will be my God."

This is radical devotion. Oh, that God would raise up Ruths all across this church family, women with courage and faith to trust God and follow wherever He leads. Women who will leave behind earthly comforts and throw aside worldly dreams. Women who will forsake worldly pleasures and securities, trusting God boldly; women with adventurous faith who will do what makes no sense because they believe in a great God and are willing to stake their life on loyalty to Him.

A story with two points of need

As they come back to Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth have two basic needs—and this is the tension that's set up here. First, they need food. They had left in a time of famine. Now they come back to Bethlehem in a time of feasting, but who's going to provide for them specifically?

This leads to the second point of need: they need family. Not only do they need an heir to carry on their family in the future, but they don't even have a husband or son to provide for them in the present. This is the main problem in the plot. Feel the tension here. How will these husbandless, childless widows survive in ancient Israel with no food and no family?

A story with two pictures of God

But behind all of this, in and out of every single verse, we see God. Or maybe it would be better to say that sometimes in this story we struggle to see God. I see two pictures of God that I would say we see from the start of this story. For the first picture, I want to take you back to Naomi's words in Ruth 1:20-21. Look at what she says when she enters into Bethlehem, because four times she mentions God. But you'll notice that she uses two different names for God. One is Yahweh, translated "the Lord." The other is a title for God, Shaddai, which is translated, "the Almighty." That's what we see first. She starts by saying, "Call me Mara, for the Almighty..." Pause right here.

This title for God, Shaddai, is a title that emphasizes God's power. God is the Almighty, the One Who is in control of all things. This is also one of the most common titles for God in the book of Job which it is used over 30 times. God is the Almighty, the omnipotent, the all-powerful One. This is the first picture of God we see in Ruth 1—God is great. Even amidst the tragedy that surrounds Naomi, she does not doubt the greatness of God's power. I emphasize this because it's not uncommon when people walk through suffering to hear them say, "Well, maybe God couldn't do this or that." Entire theologies today have been developed that explain suffering by saying, "God is doing the best He can, but there are some things that are out of His control." This is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that God is almighty. He is all-powerful. Yes, that leads to all kinds of questions about why this or that happens. Don't ever doubt that God is great, that God has all power to transform all things into good.

This leads to the second picture of God in the book of Ruth: God is great and He is good. The first time God is mentioned in the book of Ruth, in verse six, it's the name Yahweh. It's translated "the Lord," which is the covenant name for God that reveals His love for all who trust in Him. Notice that even when we get to Naomi's words at the end of this chapter, in the midst of her hurt, she uses this covenant name for God, representing His faithful love for His people. When we realize this, we realize that Naomi's words here are a humble declaration of faith. Yes, it's a struggling faith, a hurting faith, but that doesn't mean it's not faith in Almighty Yahweh.

Let's be honest—we all have or will at some point walk through hard times, difficult circumstances or terrible tragedy and have or will find ourselves tempted to doubt one of these two pictures of God. We wonder sometimes if God is really in control. Is God really great? And we wonder sometimes if God really loves us. Is God really good? Part of the point of this book is to show, amidst honest hurt, real pain and struggling faith, that God is indeed both great and good.

A story with one promise for God's people

This leads to the reality that Ruth is a story with one promise for God's people. I pray that this promise will come alive in the hearts of men and women all across this gathering, all across this city right now, and really, anybody who listens to this in the future. I pray that all of us would hear and believe and

know that because He is great and because He is good, God takes sorrowful tragedy and turns it into surprising triumph. This is what the book of Ruth teaches.

Now, we've not read the rest of the book and I really would love to dive into it right now, but we need to feel what the original reader felt here, because it's a weight that's felt all over the Bible. Throughout the history of God's people, God uses tragedy to bring about triumph. There are so many stories in this Book about famine and barrenness, pain and loss, trial and fire. Joseph is sold into slavery. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are thrown into a fiery furnace. Daniel is plunged into a lion's den. Over and over again, God's people find themselves amidst dark days and difficult times that make you wonder where God is.

We may think God is far from us...

There are times when we as God's people may think God is far from us. As I read Ruth 1 this week, I was thinking how this story is reflected in stories around this church when we are surrounded by famine or when everything seems foreign. Maybe it's not physical famine, but do you ever feel empty? Do you ever find yourself longing for something you don't have but deeply desire? Have you ever found yourself in a new place physically, a new place emotionally, a new place relationally and you're not sure how you got there? Have you ever found yourself in a place where you're just not sure what to do next?

Or what about when death strikes or despair sinks in? Maybe somebody you love died a short time ago or maybe it was a long time ago. Maybe it was expected or maybe it was totally unexpected. But the pain is still real today and you wonder if it's ever going to go away. Or maybe it's despair from something in your life that leaves you wondering, "Is there ever going to be any relief?" Barrenness and loneliness are realities so many of us are familiar with.

I think about Heather and I walking through infertility and struggling every single month with these two pictures of God. "God, we know You have power to provide children. You've given us this desire for children, so either provide or take away the desire. We don't understand."

I know there are couples who are there right now. There are singles who desire a spouse and children, struggling to understand why God would give you such a strong desire for something, only to leave it unfulfilled. Or loneliness. Have you ever walked through times when you feel like no one else really understands, even those who love you most? Or maybe there are times when you feel like no one is there to love you like you need it most.

In our grief and in our shame, we hurt, we cry, we wrestle and struggle. There are even times when we are not proud of the things we struggle with or we struggle with things other people don't understand or maybe even look down on. I don't mean to be overly depressing here, but this is real life, isn't it? When we get the diagnosis from the doctor, we sign the papers ending the marriage, we hear bad

news in our family, when the job is gone or the bottom line is not being met—whatever it is—we wonder, “Where is God in all of this?”

But God will show Himself faithful to us.

This is where I want you to see that even when we think God is farthest from us, God promises to show Himself faithful to us. That’s the promise in the book of Ruth.

You’ve probably noticed that I didn’t read the very last sentence in chapter one yet. Naomi comes back from Moab, to Bethlehem with her Moabite daughter-in-law, but then listen to the end of verse 22:

²² And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

I wish I could go into what this means in the chapters that follow, but let’s not get ahead of the story. At this moment, Naomi has no idea what this means. She is standing there saying, “I am empty.” But she has no idea that standing right next to her is the fullness of God about to be shown in a way she never could have dreamed. She has no idea that God is about to weave together the story of all stories, turning bitterness into blessing through a barley harvest. And that’s the point. Please don’t miss it, brothers and sisters.

In the moments when God may seem farthest from you, unbeknownst to you God may be laying the foundations for the greatest display of His faithfulness to you. You say, “How do you know that?” Because this is the gospel. This is a twofold story within a much greater story; this is the promise for all who trust in God.

First, His grace will cover over our sin. Elimelech had turned his back on God and the Promised Land. He had taken his family into the pagan land of compromise. But God had brought them back, and in the process, God was using Elimelech’s actions to set the stage for one of the most beautiful pictures of His grace in all of the Bible.

Similarly, Ruth was born into Moab, a sinful, pagan, idolatrous, immoral people. She was raised there, immersed in a people unpleasing to God. Now don’t miss this. Sin from your past does not dispel hope for your future, because God’s grace covers over sin. This is the gospel, the good news at the center of the Bible, and it’s the ultimate Story of turning sorrowful tragedy into surprising triumph.

We are all like Elimelech. We have all wandered from God and His promises for our lives. We are all like Ruth the Moabite with a history of sin that separates us from God and condemns us judgment. Yet God has not left us alone in this state. God has sought us out. God has come to us in the person of Jesus. Although Jesus lived a sinless life not deserving of death, He chose to die on a cross for our sins.

But that was not the end of that story, because Jesus did not stay dead. He rose from the grave and took the most tragic event in all of history and turned it into the most triumphant event in all of history:

salvation for anyone and everyone who will trust in Him. God in His greatness and goodness has made a way for you and me not to be held to our past, but to have the hope of a totally different future.

If you are not a Christian today, I'm so glad you are here. I want to invite you to see all the circumstances that have brought you to this place at this time today. I invite you to see the love of God that brought you here to hear this story today—not just Ruth, but the big picture story—and that you would see yourself in it. There is a God Who has sought after you, desiring that you would say to Him today, “Yes. I trust Your love for me. I forsake the things of this world and will follow You. Turn my story of sin and death into Your story of hope and life.”

His grace covers over sin. Not only will His grace cover our sin, His mercy will overcome our sorrow. Naomi had experienced great loss and pain in this world, as we will experience great loss and pain in this world. But by the mercy of God, we will find ourselves with great gain, a kind of gain that we never could have dreamed of before. That's a guarantee in God's Word. It may not be immediately recognizable. It will likely involve hard days and patient waiting, as we will see in this story. But we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt, now and for all of eternity, that the mercy of God will overcome our sorrow in the end. Bitterness, calamity, hurt and pain will not have the last word.

The first time I really studied the book of Ruth was 2009. I remember that because Heather and I were in the middle of an adoption process that eventually led to bringing our daughter into our family from China. From the moment we found out we would be adopting a girl, we knew what we would name her: Mara Ruth. Mara—not because we thought she'd be a bitter little baby—but because from the beginning of her life she had a story of pain and tragedy, as her birth parents were not able to take care of her. Heather and I also had a story of pain and years of longing to have children to take care.

But just as Naomi (Mara) had no idea how God would use Ruth to change her story, our daughter, my wife, and I had no idea how God was weaving together a story that would change our stories. I now look at my princess of a nine-year-old and praise God for how He takes sorrowful tragedy and turns it into surprising triumph.

I want to close by sharing a hymn with you that was written centuries ago by a man named William Cowper. Long story short, Cowper came to know Christ in a mental health facility. He suffered through bouts of deep depression all his life. Yet when he came to Christ, he discovered that amidst dark days in this world when he faced the storm clouds of trial and difficulty, those same storm clouds in the end rained down showers of mercy and grace. Listen to what he wrote in this hymn called “God Moves In a Mysterious Way.”

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

I want to invite everyone to bow your heads and close your eyes with me. As you do, I want to do two things as we close this time in God's Word. First, I want to ask the most important question I could possibly ask you: have you trusted in God's grace to cover over your sin? I believe God has brought some of you today for this moment. He has woven together all kinds of circumstances to bring you to this point to confess you have sinned against God and wandered from Him, receiving His grace to cover over all your sin through what Jesus did on the cross.

If that's you, I want to invite you right now to pray. Just say in your heart to God, "Dear God, I am a sinner and need Your grace to cover my sin. I believe Jesus died on the cross for me. Today I trust in Jesus as Lord of my life. Today I want to be restored to a relationship with You, following You as my God, with Your hope now and Your hope for all of eternity. I want Your grace to cover my sin and Your mercy to overcome any sorrow I have or will experience."

With your heads bowed and eyes closed, if you just prayed that to God, I want to invite you to quietly lift your hand where you are before God as a picture of you saying, "Yes, today I'm trusting God's grace to cover over my sin."

God, You see hands and You see hearts, people for whom You have woven together the details of their lives for this moment to receive Your grace covering over their sin through Jesus. I pray that You

would give them courage to do what 1,200-plus other people have done this year, putting on one of these shirts and being baptized to celebrate faith and life in Jesus.

Secondly, I know that in a room this size, many are walking through so many different things right now. I want to pray particularly for those of you who are walking through difficult circumstances right now and can identify with one or more of these things we've just seen in Naomi's life. If you find yourself walking through a particular trial or valley or challenge in your life right now, I want to pray specifically for you. If that's you, with our heads bowed and eyes closed, would you just lift up your hand where you are? You're saying, "I need extra mercy and grace. I'm struggling this way or that way."

God, You see these hands—so many of them. You know what's going on in every single one of these circumstances. You know better than they do what's going on in those circumstances. You know not only what has happened and what is happening, but You know what's going to happen. You know what the next chapter looks like, and the next chapter, and the next chapter. You know the depth of hurt and pain, the waiting and the timing. So God, I pray on their behalf that You would give them faith to trust in Your greatness and Your goodness today, then give them that kind of faith for tomorrow and the next day and the next day. Show Your greatness and Your goodness. Take tragedy and turn it into triumph. We've just seen in Your Word that You have power to do that over and over and over again on behalf of Your people. So do it again and again and again in all these circumstances. We pray that You would bring healing in the midst of hurts. We pray that You would bring joy from pain. We pray that You would bring hope from despair.

God, we praise You for Your promises. I think about Isaiah 43 and want to pray that over those who raised their hands: *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned... For I am the Lord your God... You are precious and honored, and I love you."*

May they hear those words from You to Your people, receive them, resting in them and in Jesus our hope, Jesus our joy, Jesus our life. We praise You for covering over our sin, comforting and overcoming us in our sorrow. We praise You for the hope that one day You will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Help us trust in You from this day until that day, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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