

Ruth 1:1-5

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[0 : 00] Before we jump into looking at this introduction to the story of Ruth, I think it would be helpful if we begin by establishing a framework of sorts through which we might understand the book of Ruth as a whole. And this isn't backwards or circular in any sense. You might be thinking, let's just get into the story, right? We love stories. Let's just get into it. Can't we just start? After all, this is God's word, right? This is God's word. Shouldn't we just be able to take off with it? But you can't. None of us would come to the book of Ruth cold like that. You can't. You can't go to a bookstore and find the book of Ruth on the shelf and start off without any context. It's meant to be read in context. That would be like when I tried to decipher a cookbook of Catherine's.

You know, I've been on my own for a week or so and I'm learning again what that's like. And I come to even something like a recipe without knowing anything about cooking. And sure, I might get some of it. I might even get the bulk of it. But do you know what happens every time without fail?

Every time without fail. Whatever it is I'm trying to make, yeah, it has a slight resemblance in the end to the picture in the book or the description. But every time without fail I have missed some detail.

Or I have skipped some step because I thought it wasn't important. Because I don't know any better. And oftentimes that detail, that step that I skipped is tragic. Because I know I've eaten my food.

Tragic. And it's a lot like that for us. We come to these stories in the Bible and oftentimes we're just cracking them open. Coming to them cold. But without context, we miss some detail.

[2 : 10] We miss some piece of the context. We miss some step in the story. Because we don't know any better. And oftentimes for us who are trying to shape our lives and determine where we're going in life, it's nothing less than tragic.

You see, we're meant from the very beginning to read this story in context. And you can tell that even from the opening line. In the days when the judges judged.

Well, who are the judges? And in what days did they judge? We're meant to read it in context. The book of Ruth, and really any book of the Bible, wasn't written to be read on its own.

They're written to be read in the context of what's come before. And for many of them, and certainly for the book of Ruth, we can tell it was written in light of the events that would follow after it.

It was written to tell us how we got where we are. And at that time, more specifically, it was written to tell us how we got to having King David on the throne.

[3 : 21] From the time when there were only judges. So what's the framework that will help us to see this story as it was meant to be seen?

What's the framework? To pick up on the details and understand every step along the way. I mentioned before that Ruth gives us a picture of God as the faithful one.

Working out in the minutest details of life his plans for salvation. And we see that because of context. Put your thumb in Ruth and flip to the table of contents.

It'll be on page two or three or four in your Bibles. This is a great page that we don't use enough. Some of us don't realize the Bible has a table of contents. So flip to the table of contents.

And look where Ruth falls in the Old Testament. You start with those books of Moses. Genesis, where we had all those promises. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

[4 : 21] Where those promises are fleshed out and a people grow out of Abraham. This is when the family of Abraham is established. And then we have Joshua.

The story of the taking of the land that God promised to Israel. And then the book of Judges. When everybody was doing what was right in their own eyes.

Because though they had the land, they had no king. Ruth falls right there. And what follows is the books of Samuel.

Where finally Israel gets its king. So you see that the book of Ruth bridges the gap between the conquest of the land under Joshua and the establishment of its peace under King David.

It answers the picture of anarchy in Judges with the picture of monarchy in Samuel. And it ultimately gives us a picture of a God as the faithful one.

[5 : 28] Working out in the midst of life's soap opera. His plans to save us. He is moving, guiding, directing history along to accomplish his redemptive purposes.

So if we walk away today with nothing else, it is my hope that we will have grasped at least to a greater degree how the hand of God is faithfully working all things.

In all things, through all things, by all things, according to his glorious will for salvation. God is the faithful one.

And in order to start us on this path of seeing God as the faithful one, let's look more closely at these five verses and see three experiences all of us have where God's faithfulness resounds.

Three experiences. The first experience each of us is touched by and in which we ought to see God's faithfulness is in the midst of widespread disaster.

[6 : 36] God's faithfulness in the midst of widespread disaster. Back in verse one, we read that in the days when the judges judged, there was famine in the land.

A famine that affected every region of the land of Israel. But even more specifically, we read of its effects on one specific city, the city of Bethlehem.

And as some of you may know, Bethlehem, the city of Bethlehem, was a city whose name meant the house of bread, Bethlehem. Yet there was no bread in the house of bread.

Famine had left the entire land desolate. And where was God in the midst of this? Where was he when food was running out?

When his people were going hungry? When this man, Elimelech in particular, packed up and left with his family to find security in a foreign land? Where was he in the midst of such widespread devastation?

[7 : 44] Where is he for that matter when hurricanes sweep through? Where is he when earthquakes take their toll and leave nations in rubble?

Where was he when the terrorists hit the world trade centers? and I could see as a boy standing on the road next to my home the smoke billowing into the sky and covering New York City in ashes.

Where was he? Well, rather than speculate answers, which all of us can do, let's just follow God.

Tell us where you are. Remember for a moment the storyline. Where we are coming from and where we are headed. Thumb through the pages of scripture in your mind's eye to the opening verses of the gospel of Matthew where Ruth, the name of the other Moabitess taken in marriage by one of Naomi's sons, where Ruth will be included in the genealogy of Jesus.

Thumb through to read of the famines and the storms, the disasters and devastation, which not only are unable to hinder God's plan, but time and again we see are used by him to accomplish them.

[9 : 13] You see, God was right there in the midst of the famine. And he wasn't just sitting there baffled by it, wondering how he might clean up after it.

He wasn't even sitting there sovereignly holding it in place, wishing he could have rather been playing golf. God was there.

He wielded the famine in order to work his plans to get a man to leave his country so that a woman named Ruth might marry his son and after he dies and leaves her a widow that she might return to his country and marry one of his relatives to bear the son who would have a son who would bear God's king, David.

And eventually through that line another would be born, his only son, Jesus Christ. They're not all the same. Not all as significant.

Not all are as directly related to the central story of what God is doing in our world. but there is no disaster. There is no instance of devastation.

[10 : 27] No brush stroke that is not a beautifully intended part of the masterpiece God is painting. And more than work around them, God, in his wonderful sovereignty, is able to work through them and work by them so that they become the instruments by which his plans are accomplished.

God is faithful in the midst of disaster. And in this story of God's faithfulness to his people, there is no room left for chance or happenstance.

Only for a God who works all things according to the purpose of his masterpiece. I've been reflecting a bit lately on our coming back to Scotland and the history that's led us here, a history that even predates our own entrance onto the stage.

And part of that goes back to a fire that devastated the city of Chicago a little over a hundred years ago. And a man in that city lost all that he had worked for both in business and ministry and while it was all being rebuilt he took to the seas to preach the gospel here in Great Britain.

Not too far from here a couple were invited to a neighboring farm to hear him preach and God used that to open their eyes to the beauty of Jesus.

[12 : 07] That was Catherine's great, great grandparents. And in a lot of ways I wouldn't be here today if it hadn't been for that fire back then. Skim the pages of history and read of the countless stories in which disaster is directly connected to the salvation of the multitudes.

To the turning back to God. God uses disaster to accomplish his purposes.

Through the world's brokenness mankind is called back to God. The author of Ruth has an agenda to fix our eyes on our God.

To see his hand at work in every experience of life bringing about the fulfillment of his plans. The second experience each of us faces at some point is that of personal tragedy.

But even here God wants us to see as the faithful one working out his plans of redemption that he is faithful even in the midst of personal tragedy.

[13 : 31] While disaster was the means by which God brought this family to sojourn in a foreign land. In Moab it was through the means of personal tragedy that he put in motion how his plans would pan out.

In Moab verse 3 tells us Elimelech dies and leaves his wife widowed with their two sons. And as if the loss of a husband wasn't enough this widow then loses her only other security in life.

Her two sons, right? They die too. So that by the end of verse 5 she is left alone with nothing to cling to and no one to cry to, only her two daughters-in-law to cry with.

Yet it was through the means of personal tragedy that God prepared for the unfolding of his plans. You see, if Elimelech had not died there would have been no reason for Naomi to ever return to her homeland of Israel.

She could have lived out her days comfortably on foreign soil. And if Machlan and Kilian had not died we would never have been able to read of the birth of David in chapter 4 or the birth of Christ in Matthew 1.

[14 : 47] Even in the midst of personal tragedy God is at work faithfully moving history toward his desired ends. God is to lift high his name and show himself to be the only answer to life's deepest, most significant questions.

you lose a spouse God is the only one to cling to. You lose a child God is the only one to hope in.

You break your neck you lose your job you find yourself alone with no one the only thing left to do is to cry out to the one who never slumbers or sleeps or rests his head who always hears and will someday answer all things with himself and as much as he is the one to point the finger at he's big enough both to blame and to trust.

Long before the Chicago fire in the year 1841 when D.L. Moody was only four years old his father collapsed and died leaving his pregnant wife with seven children and one month later she gave birth to twins making it nine because of his poor financial management creditors shortly after his death confiscated most of the family's assets except for their modest home yet as dire as the circumstances seemed there was God moving everything towards his desired end a local pastor befriended the family and encouraged them to trust the Lord and under his supervision the young Moody had one of his first encounters with this merciful compassionate and loving deity biographers look back on the life of the

Moody family and see no hint of interest in spiritual matters till the death of their father yet through this one death God brought ten closer to himself and of the ten one would touch the lives of millions with the gospel while the author of Ruth wants us to see God's faithfulness in the midst of widespread disaster he also wants us to see God's faithfulness in the midst of personal tragedy such hardship does not come down by chance alone as broken as our world is it is not out of control God is enthroned above this world and directs all history tragedy and disaster alike according to his perfect will lastly we ought to see in these five verses that God's faithfulness is there in bringing his redemptive plans to pass extending even through human sinfulness

[18 : 31] God's faithfulness in the midst of human sinfulness we must see that the famine God used to bring this family to Moab was not just a natural disaster it was punishment punishment for idolatry it was punishment punishment for apostasy it is not insignificant that the author begins in the days when the judges judged it's meant to call to mind the debauchery of Israel God's people not all disasters are punishment punishment but this one surely was at least in the mind of the author in the days when the judges judged and when we hear that there was a famine in the land it ought to call to mind the warnings spoken by Moses that if you will not obey the voice of the

Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you including that the heavens over your head shall be bronze and the earth under your feet shall be iron the Lord will make the rain of your land powder from heaven dust shall come it shall come on you until you are destroyed this famine was punishment to a wayward nation on top of this the deaths of Elimelech and his two sons were not timely deaths seeking to escape the famine Elimelech took his family and fled to a foreign land Elimelech whose name means my God is king rather than living up to his name and honoring the Lord as king he like everyone else in the times of the judges elevated himself to be the ruler of his own destiny and fled the symptom of famine rather than face the sin of anarchy the sin of autocracy ruling himself have you been there

I've been there I've been the autocrat of my life I've been the anarchist in my family my God has not been my king and in fleeing to save his own life from the famine on domestic soil all he finds is death on foreign soil still God is at work bringing them to Moab and introducing us to Ruth who becomes the grandmother of David the ancestor of Christ and isn't that what the entire gospel hinges on that God can bring good out of evil make something out of nothing and use even us in our sinfulness for his purposes purposes which center on our being welcomed back into fellowship with him despite our unworthiness the only reason

Moody had any reason to travel here to Great Britain the only reason that priest that pastor reached out his hand to that family after the father died the only reason we have to proclaim anything is because of what we have seen and heard that God used the sinful acts of man who put to death his innocent son according to his glorious plans in order to bring salvation to an otherwise helpless world is that not the good news that the world we see is not all we see that there is more than meets the eye is that not the gospel there is no moment in history outside the sovereign hand of our great

God but even more significant is the fact that there is no moment no disaster no tragedy no instance of faithlessness on our parts or the parts of those we love or even downright sinfulness that God is not wielding capable of and doing so for his redemptive purposes in the midst of disaster and tragedy in the midst of our sinfulness God is faithful I don't know what's happening in your life I don't know the pain that's affected you or you bring here today or has overtaken you or that you've brought on yourself or that you've brought on others what I know is that God reigns and no matter where you find yourself this week no matter how bad things get

[24 : 02] God is bigger and the only hope that we have is if God is king capable of holding the minutest details of life within his plans and doing so and if the king he provides is no less than God himself his only son Jesus for you and me who have found ourselves in this great big painting it's hard for us to understand where it's all going and how our lives which look sometimes just like a bunch of paint thrown carelessly onto a canvas an endless soap opera how they can somehow be the backdrop for a masterpiece piece the intention of a great artist that's not quite finished yet and the question is are you going to trust the artist the artist who knit michelangelo together in his mother's womb donatello raphael rest of the ninja turtles are you going to trust the artist who's painted us into the picture or are you as a stroke on a canvas going to put more trust in your ability to decide what's a mistake and what's not one of the great things that the bible teaches us especially in all these stories is that no matter how bad things look they always turn out to be the perfect backdrop for god's perfect masterpiece so are you going to trust god as the artist or think you know better as the art i would suggest that you trust him we're going to close by singing the words from psalm 146 it's the first of what are called the hallel psalms or the hallelujah psalms the psalms of praise and what i don't like is when you're around people who praise god it seems by putting aside the pain of life that word hallelujah or the expression praise the lord seems to be most often found on the lips of those trying to escape pain but it's something to remember that psalms like these were written not outside of the pain of life but within it and for that reason you can sing too so we're going to sing from psalm 146 verses 1 to 6 it's on page 191 of sing psalms and we'll sing to the tune of stuttgart psalm 146 verses 1 to 6 would you stand and sing 6 and see you all good up