

Ruth

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Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

[0 : 00] I'd like you to turn back to the book of Ruth, and not to the chapter that we read, but to the final chapter, and especially the last few verses, beginning at 18.

Chapter 4, verse 18. This then is the family line of Peres. Peres was the father of Hezron. Hezron the father of Ram. Ram the father of Aminadab. Aminadab the father of Nashon. Nashon the father of Solomon. Solomon the father of Boaz. Boaz the father of Obed. Obed the father of Jesse. And Jesse the father of David.

This story from the Old Testament, the story of Ruth, is a story which all commentaries and literary studies reckon is to be beautifully crafted.

It's a story that has been told over many generations. It's a story which still has a strong appeal today, even although we live many centuries later, and in a world that is very different.

It's the kind of story in the Bible that would lend itself into making a film. Sometimes when we read the Bible it might be helpful for us, especially if we're looking at a narrative passage such as this, to ask ourselves, how would we film this story?

[1 : 47] Many of us spend a lot of time watching television. And perhaps we should use the experience that we gain from watching video and DVDs to help us to understand better the Bible.

And one way of doing that is to ask yourself, how would you make a film of this story, the story of Ruth? Not simply the first chapter and the last few verses which we read, but the whole story.

One could imagine, for example, the scene, the leaving Moab, when Naomi and her two daughters-in-law leave Moab. That would be a very poignant scene.

They've heard that the famine has gone in Bethlehem and they leave. And then Naomi invites, indeed commands, her daughters-in-law to remain.

Because she realises all the problems that will lie ahead for them in a different and an alien culture. And yet, although Orpah goes back, Ruth does not.

[3 : 02] And she makes that tremendous commitment which is so well known to her, to her mother-in-law and to her God. In verse 16, See this commitment on the part of Ruth to leave her people, to serve her mother-in-law and through serving her mother-in-law serve the Lord.

Is a notable commitment. In many ways similar to the commitment that Abram was called upon to make when he was called to leave his country.

When he was called upon to leave his family. And to go to a country which the Lord would show him. And just as Abram is the prototype of faith, if you like, the founding father of faith.

There is a sense in which Ruth perhaps is the founding mother of faith. She went out into believing what was known for what was unknown.

Believing that God would lead her and that God would guide her. I think also that any film of this story would focus on the arrival in Bethlehem of Ruth and Naomi.

[4 : 35] The people, the women on the edge of the village of Bethlehem saying, Can this be Naomi? Some commentators believe that Elimelech's family was an aristocratic family.

And you can imagine if that was the case the people saying, Has Naomi been reduced to this? Can this possibly be Naomi? It's full of pathos. Full of emotion.

And then Naomi's deep, anguished reply. She said, Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara. Because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.

I went away full, but the Lord brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.

Here we have a deep cry that comes from the very, A deep cry of agony that comes from the soul of Naomi. A cry similar to the cry of the psalmist in Psalm 13, Which we sung just a few moments ago.

[5 : 44] She was passing through the dark night of the soul. She cries out in agony of spirit, Thinking that the Lord had it in for her. Convinced that the Lord had become her enemy.

Then, of course, in chapter 3, We have the romantic encounter between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor.

And there we have a very, quite remarkable situation, Where Ruth takes the initiative, And in fact, in effect, asks Boaz to marry her. That was something that just was completely counter-cultural.

First of all, she was a woman. And in the culture, a woman never asked a man to marry her. It was always the man's prerogative. Secondly, she was a Moabite.

She was a foreigner. And the Moabites and the Israelites simply had nothing in common. And they lived in deep, There was a deep ethnic tension between them.

[6 : 51] And yet Ruth was able to overcome this, As she made her commitment to Israel's God, And that she took the initiative In seeking to ensure The name of her husband would endure into the future.

Then we have the scene in chapter 4 at the beginning, Where Boaz calls the elders together in the gate, Where the place where the village elders met And took their decisions. And he said that Naomi had returned, And that she had some property which belonged to her late husband, And that she was looking for someone Who would become, Who would redeem that property.

And who would, Who would, Who would, Who would honor her. And Boaz said that he was a relative, And he had the right to do that, But there was a closer relative.

And we're not told what his name was, I suppose we might just have to call him Mr. So-and-so. And he indeed comes forward, And when he hears that there's land available, He immediately is interested.

But when he discovers that Acquiring the land will require him to marry Ruth, He has second thoughts. And he feels that will affect his own estate, And affect the inheritance for his own family.

[8 : 14] So he withdraws. And he takes off his sandal in a very dramatic way, And hands it to Boaz. This was the customers we explained in that chapter.

That's something that could well be filmed. That's something that could be captured, As this near relative, The nearest relative, First of all says yes, And then declines, When he realizes that it involves Accepting new responsibilities.

And Boaz acting as the kinsman redeemer, And buying the land, And marrying Ruth. And perhaps the final scene, Which might be the object of a film shot, Would be Naomi nursing Obed.

And it's interesting that Obed is there described as her kinsman redeemer. Not simply Boaz, But Obed. Because through Obed, Her family line continues.

Her name and the name of her late husband Will continue. And there will be a future for her, And for her family.

[9 : 27] Now, this story, of course, Is a story which is not simply a beautiful story, Which is well crafted. It's a story which is more than a window, Provides us with more than a window, Into a very different culture, To a very different situation from ours.

This story is also a mirror, In which invites us to see ourselves, So that we are invited to become engaged with this story.

Not simply to look at it as spectators, But in a sense to become participants in it. To become involved in it. Not just to stand at a distance, And say that's a nice story, It's a moving story, To make a good film.

But to ask the question, Where am I? In this story. Which of the characters in this story, Is most like me?

At this particular point of time. James tells us that the Bible is a mirror, And we're to use it as such. And when we come to the Bible, We're to come personally, To recognize that this is a story, Which in a sense tells our story.

[10 : 41] A story in which we can, We can find meaning, And purpose for our lives. So I ask you this question this morning, As I ask myself the question, In whom do I see myself, In this story?

Do I see myself, Most strongly represented in Orpah, In her refusal to face change? She went back. She was not prepared to go forward, Into the unknown. Is that, A mirror, Of someone here this morning? Or, Do you see yourself in Naomi, In her agony of soul, Convinced that, God was against her?

And there are many people in the world, Like that today, Who feel that, That God has gone against them, And they can't understand, Why life is so hard, Why life involves so much pain, Psychological pain, Physical pain, Maybe there's someone here today, Who sees themselves in Naomi, Or in the words of the Psalm 13, Which we sung earlier in the service, Or is there someone here this morning, Who's looking into the story, And see, You see yourself in Ruth, In her willingness to make a commitment, In her desire to be loyal, To her mother-in-law, And to her new family, And to her new community, Perhaps there's someone here, Who's recently made such a commitment, To the Lord and to the church, And your commitment, Is being confirmed, As you see yourself in Ruth, Or perhaps there's someone here, Who's failed to make that commitment, And you're challenged, By Ruth's example, Or again, There may be someone here, Who sees themselves, Mirrored in Boaz, In his lavish generosity, In his willingness to help others, May God grant that may be so, That God has given to some, The gift of generosity, The gift of hospitality, The gift of kindness, Or is there someone here this morning, Who see themselves, In the unknown, Kinsman, Unnamed Kinsman, Redeemer, Mr. So-and-so, In his determination, Not to allow his life, To be disturbed, By new responsibilities, There are many people like that, In the world today, Who've got a big notice, Above their lives, Do not disturb, Just like that man,

[13 : 34] Willing to take, The field of it, Had no complications, No responsibilities, But because there were responsibilities, He turned it down, Well let us just for a few moments this morning, Look at three people in the story, Or two people in the story, And the one person behind the story, Who is the person who tells the story, The storyteller, Or the narrator, Because I think he also, Or it could have been she, Has an important message, For us, In order to, Perhaps help us to understand, The role of these three, Personalities, Let me share with you, The result of, A poll, That I read of recently, Taken, In the United States, It was a survey of, Of nonagenarians, That's people aged, Ninety to ninety-nine, And each of them were asked,

If you could live your life, Over again, What would you do differently? It's interesting, There were three main replies, There were some who said, I'd reflect more, There were others who said, I'd risk more, And there were still others who said, I'd do more that might live on after me, And there's a sense in which, Each of these responses fit, These three people that we're going to look at in the moment, Because Naomi, For example, Is a person who reflected deeply, And openly, I mean, She didn't bottle up, Her agony, And her emotions, She expressed them, To the Lord, She brought them out, She was absolutely open with God, There's a profound spiritual integrity, About her, She could have suppressed these emotions, But she didn't, Ruth, Was a risk taker, She took an enormous risk, Leaving her culture, She was going into a culture, Where the Moabites, Were hated, And despised, And in fact, Were excluded, And were not allowed to enter, But she believed that, God through her mother-in-law, Was calling her, And she was prepared to take that risk, The storyteller, The narrator, Who tells this story, We don't know who he or she, Is or was, They made a major contribution,

To a future, That he or she, Would not live to see, By helping to ensure, The kingship of David, And his descendants, David as we know, Would provide a model, Albeit an imperfect model, Of the Messiah, Who came in Jesus, And so the book, Which this, Storyteller has given us, Lives on many centuries, After him, And he has made that contribution, That many people would like to make, To life, And so all three of these, Characters, All three of these personalities, Present a challenge, To us, Because, There's a sense in which, We, Are just a few centuries, Behind them, In the journey of life, The whole idea, Of life being a journey, Is a strong one, In the book of Ruth, You know, Ruth's commitment, Was, To Naomi, She said,

Where you go, I will go, Where you lodge, That is stay the night, On a journey, I will lodge, And this whole story, Is a reminder, That the people of God, Are a pilgrim people, And the whole human race, Is a pilgrim race, And the journey, That Ruth and Naomi, And Boaz, Were on, Is a journey, Which we are on, We are some, Generations behind them, But nevertheless, It's the same journey, And so they challenge us, To see ourselves, And to see, Our journey, In their journey, Well let's look very quickly, At each of these, First of all, At Naomi, And there's a key word, To sum up, Naomi's experience, Initial experience, At least, Is the word, Agony, Here we see, An intense, Mental and spiritual, Anguish, Being expressed, By her, In the first chapter, She felt that God, Was against her, She felt that God,

[18 : 39] Had it in for her, The Lord, She said, Has afflicted me, Literally, The Lord has witnessed, Against me, The Lord is my, Legal opponent, The Lord is taking me, To court, The Lord is taking me, To judgment, There was no light, At the end of her tunnel, Her bitterness, And anxiety, Contradicted her name, Which meant delight, That she brings this, Out into the open, She doesn't suppress it, And one of the things, That psalms, Like psalm 13, Which we sang earlier, Help us to do, Is to bring, Our anguish, Our pain, Out into the open, And hand it over to God, Recently, I was at a conference, In the south of England, At which, An international conference, On using the scriptures, And there was a couple of, Ladies there from Africa, Who shared with us, How they, They are involved,

In a trauma healing ministry, In Africa, And this is a big, Big problem, In the Congo, For example, Where there has been, So much civil war, There's been, People have suffered, So much from AIDS, And in the aftermath of war, There's always a lot of rape, And they have fulfilled, A remarkable ministry, Helping people, Helping the Lord, To heal these traumas, And they've used the Psalms, Like Psalm 13, And these lament Psalms, Which the Lord has given to us, With a purpose, One third of the Psalms, One third, Fifty, Roughly fifty, Of the Psalms, In the Old Testament, Are lament Psalms, I remember Don Carson, A few years ago, Speaking at the Creep conference, Saying that, Saying to us as ministers, He said, The Lord has given, You the lament Psalms, Not to make a three-point sermon, But to help people to lament, And some people believe, That because we don't use these Psalms, In that way, That some people are turning to the cults, Whether that's true or not, I don't know, But certainly we don't use these Psalms, In the way that Naomi, Expressed her pain to the Lord, And handed it over to him, And eventually the Lord heard her, And answered her prayer, It's interesting that it was when Naomi brought her lament about the Lord, Out into the open, That Ruth made her commitment, Sometimes we feel, That when we witness, We have to witness as winners, That the witness that Naomi gave to Ruth, Was the witness of a lamenter, And Ruth took note, And Ruth believed, And perhaps we need to rediscover, The use to use these Psalms of lament,

To help us to bring our pains to the Lord, Our agonies to the Lord, And hand them over to him, And it may be that if we do that, People will take note, As Ruth took note of Naomi, Then we come to Ruth, Well if the key word to describe Naomi's experience was, Agony, Or is agony, The key word for Ruth, Is loyalty, She made an extraordinarily deep commitment, To Naomi and to her people, Even if Naomi's people, Unlike her, Really didn't like the Moabites, It's interesting that, That the writer rubs in the fact, That Ruth, Was from Moab, Six times in the story, She's referred to as, Ruth the Moabites, Or Ruth the Moabite, Six times, And he's making the point, He's making the point here,

Deliberately, As we shall see, And we'll see the reason why, In a moment, The Moabites were forbidden incorporation, Into Israel, They were idolaters, They had opposed Israel, In her long pilgrimage, From Egypt to Canaan, Balak the king of Moab, Had hired Balaam, Who tempted the Israelites, Into gross, Gross immorality, And there was a, Deep, Deep, Deep division, Between them, Very similar to the, Ethnic divisions, That divide, The Israelis, And the Palestinians, Today, The book of Ruth is more, It's about more than, Personal loyalty, It's also about, The loyalty of the community, To Naomi, The loyalty of Boaz, And the others there, The solidarity of that community, It was a community that, Did care for the foreigner, For the widow, And for the poor, It was a community, Of kinsmen redeemers,

[23 : 46] It was a community, Where people cared, For one another, And perhaps, We need to ask ourselves, Whether, Our community, The church, Of God in Scotland, Bon Accord Free Church, Whether, Whether we, We see ourselves, In as a caring community, And whether in fact, We are the kind of, Caring community, Where we do look after, Those who are hurting, And who are vulnerable, And who are, In need, This community, Stood out, In an age, When the judges ruled, When everyone, Did what was right, In their own eyes, And there's a sense, In which we live, In a society today, Like that, Where everyone, Is increasingly, Out for himself, Or herself, Where, Number one, Is what counts, As one, American put it, Everyone else,

Is an item, On my menu, Now, In that kind, Of society, In which we live, The church is called upon, To be a caring community, A community, Of kinsmen, Redeemers, A community, That cares, For those who are weak, For those who are hurt, For those who are marginalized, For those who are despised, And to demonstrate, The love of God, In a tangible, Concrete way, But then, There's the storyteller, And if the key word, Summing up, Naomi's experience, Initially is agony, And Ruth's

experience is loyalty, I think the word, The key word for the storyteller, Is the word priority, Because he got his priorities right, That's the point that comes out, In this story, Why did he tell this story? Why did he commit it to writing? Probably there are many reasons, Why this story was told, But there's one main reason, These multiple reasons, Are like the strands, That compose a rope, And the main reason, The rope if you like, Is found in the words, That we quoted at the beginning, At the end of the chapter, That Obed was the father of Jesse, And Jesse, Was the father, Of David, See, This book was probably written, At a time, When David's claim to the throne, Was disputed, That may have been during, David's own lifetime, For ten years, He was a fugitive, And even for seven years, After he became, A king of Judah, The northern kingdom, Refused to, To recognize him, The northern tribes, Refused to recognize him, And even later on, Into the, Into the, Davidic dynasty, There were tensions, Between the north, And the south, And one of the reasons, That people, Appeared to be suspicious, Of David, Is that his, His great, Grandmother, Was a Moabites, And that's perhaps, Why the writer, Here, Makes the point, Six times, He's illustrating, That in spite of the fact, That Ruth was a Moabite, As God used her, God accepted her, And God blessed her, David's, Claim to the throne, Has been compared, By a modern, Jewish, Commentator, As, Being somewhat similar, To Hitler's, Grandson's, Standing to be, Prime minister, In the state of Israel, Something like that, He said, And, This story was written, In order to, To, To, Underline, David's claim to the throne, Because David was the Lord's anointed, And the person who wrote this story, Was absolutely convinced of that, And that's his priority, He wants the kingdom of God to come, Because he saw that the kingdom of God, Was flowing through, The line of David, And David, And to David's greater son, Jesus Christ, And he wanted the kingdom of God to come, And that was his priority, And that's why he wrote this book, Because he was led, By God to do so, And the challenge here for us, As we look in this book, As a mirror, Is to whether the kingdom of God, Is our great priority, Whether that is the thing, That counts more than anything else, That God's kingship, Should be affirmed, And established, Here on earth, Is that what counts more, Than anything else, You may have heard,

[28 : 46] The often told story, Of the Christian executive, In McDonald's, The hamburger chain, In Oak Brook, In Illinois, In America, But he told a Christian friend, On Sundays I honour, God, The family, And McDonald's, In that order, But on Mondays, I turned the list around, And that's one of the problems, That we face, Is it not the temptation, To turn the list around, To affirm that, The kingdom of God, Is our great priority here, As we worship God, On Sunday, But then on Monday, Monday to Saturday, Joe is put back, To the end of the list, This book is challenging us, To see the priority, Of the kingdom, Of God, So this book is a mirror, Helps us to see ourselves, But it invites us,

Not simply to see ourselves, It invites us to make a response, God's word is a word, Which simply not only presents a picture, A mirror, It's a word of power, And God's word which challenges us, Is a word which also is commanding us, To respond, And whatever, Whoever you've seen yourself in, In this story, However the Holy Spirit, May have spoken to you, Through this story today, You're being invited to respond, Not to delay a response, But to confirm a response, To make a response, To whatever God may be saying to you, We believe that this book, Was inspired originally, By the Holy Spirit, And that's why it is in scripture, But the writer to the Hebrews, Reminds us that the spirit, Who inspired, These ancient, Old Testament scriptures, Speaks to them, Also, Speaks also, Through them today,

The spirit who inspired, The scriptures, Still speaks to them today, So that God's word, May be printed here, On the page, That God's word, On the page, Becomes the voice of God, To our souls, And if you've heard, God's voice today, Speaking to you through this book, I would urge you to respond, Not to delay, Not, To deny, But to accept, What God is saying to you, And to make the commitment, That Ruth made, When she, Committed herself, Lock, Stock and barrel, To go with God, And to go, With Naomi, We, Also, Are on a journey, God is challenging us, To go with him, In English, We often say, God be with you, That idiom in Spanish, Is slightly different, It says, Go with God, And I think, What this book, Is challenging us to do, What Ruth is challenging us, To do today, Is to go with God, To make that commitment, That Ruth made, And to go from now on, Throughout life, To go with God, And to make him, Our great priority, And to honour Jesus, As the Lord, Of our lives, And that is the invitation, That this ancient book, Is offering to us today, May God grant that, All of us, By his grace, May accept it, And make that commitment,

That we, May go, With God, Let's pray, Our heavenly father, As we, Come to the close, Of this service, We thank you, For this, Witness, Of the book of Ruth, We thank you, For its relevance, To where we are, To what we are doing, To where we want to go, We pray, We pray, We pray, Oh God, That the spirit of God, Who inspired this book, To be written, So many centuries ago, May be present, In our midst, To make these words, Alive, In our experience, We pray, That we may hear his voice, And that we may not, Harden our hearts, That we would, Know that softening, Of heart, That we may indeed, Make that commitment, And to say with Ruth, I will go, Help us, Oh Lord, Our God, Now by your spirit, To go, With you, In Jesus name, Amen, And now may the grace, Of the Lord Jesus Christ, And the love of God, And the fellowship, Of the Holy Spirit, Be with you all, Now and evermore, Amen.