

Friday Communion Service

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[0 : 0 0] Before we turn to God's Word this evening, let me just say what a great pleasure and privilege it is for me to be here for this communion weekend. I very much look forward to being here, and I want to thank David for the invitation to come and to share God's Word with you, and I trust that God will bless us richly.

The book of Ruth is one of the shortest books of the Bible, but I think its significance is out of all proportion to its length. It's a remarkable book, and I want us to glean in it over these days.

One of the main characters of the book isn't actually Ruth, but her mother-in-law, Naomi, and I want to look at this book of Ruth very much through the eyes of Naomi, of whom we read at the end of chapter 1, that she returned from Moab, accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

This first chapter opens with Naomi leaving Bethlehem for Moab and closes with Naomi leaving Moab for Bethlehem.

The context of the book of Ruth is set in the very opening phrase. These were the days when the judges ruled.

[1 : 4 0] The previous book of the Old Testament tells us all about the judges, the men that God raised up as interim leaders of the people of God when there was, to use the last verse of the book of Judges, no king in Israel.

The throne was vacant. There was no crowned monarch, no crowned head over the people of God. Israel had no king. Everyone did as he saw fit.

Now that's a remarkable statement. In spite of the fact that God had set up judges and given these rulers to his people and given them the law and told them how they should live, everyone did as he saw fit.

Nobody was going to tell anybody what to do. It was a day of anarchy and independence as far as the Bible is concerned.

There were judges, but very few willing to be judged. There were rulers, but very few willing to be ruled. This was a day when everybody asserted their own freedom and their own independence and their own right to govern their own lives, and the politically correct thing to do was give everybody their own space.

[3 : 0 5] That's what everybody demanded. It's got very much of a modern ring to it. It could be the epitaph over our own day and our own generation.

Everyone is doing as he sees fit. And old standards and old rules and old principles governing private behavior and public morality are discarded as old things and not very fashionable nowadays.

Everyone is doing as he sees fit. Well, the Bible written all these years ago, all these centuries ago, is remarkably relevant. And it was in those days of asserted independence that the events of the Book of Ruth took place.

And the Book of Ruth is all about God's remarkable workings in history and God's remarkable workings in individual histories and in personal lives against the backdrop of this widespread universal phenomenon of personal self-assertion and independence.

When everybody is doing as he sees fit, God is doing as he sees fit. And he is working out his will and working out his purpose for the salvation of his people.

[4 : 36] So, the Book of Judges ends by saying there was no king. Everyone was doing as he saw fit. But the Book of Ruth is going to end with the name of the king that God determines will sit on his throne and will govern his people.

And the Book of Ruth is tracing the work of God for us. And one of its great purposes is that we will marvel at the God who works amid the chaos of a generation who lives as it pleases to do what pleases him and to work out his salvation in the lives of men and women.

I think tonight that every one of us ought to take the greatest comfort from this little book sandwiched between Judges and 1 Samuel. You could almost miss it reading through the pages of the Old Testament.

If you flick the pages over too quickly, you'll miss it altogether. But we have to stop at it and we have to marvel that our God is the God of this book. And amid all the chaos of the world around us and all the independence and all the secularism and all the atheism, all the self-will of man asserted in so many different ways, God is doing his work in the world tonight.

And we lay hold by faith on that tremendous principle expressed so magnificently by the psalmist when he said, God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.

[6 : 20] In fact, that note is actually struck right at the beginning of the Book of Ruth. Because the first person to whom we are introduced in this book is a man who bears the name that means, My God is King.

The name Elimelech simply means, My God is King. There was a man from Bethlehem. His name was Elimelech.

His wife was Naomi, and they had two sons, Ephrathites, from Bethlehem, Judah. My God is King. What a tremendous name to have been given as a little child.

You know, every one of us in here tonight who's a Christian carries that name. My God is King. Isn't that what the early Christians professed?

Jesus is Lord. He's my God. He's my King. He's my Savior. The profession that we make as Christians isn't so much a profession of faith.

[7 : 27] I know we use that terminology. It's a profession of a person. We profess that Jesus is God and He is our King.

Elimelech had a great name. My God is King. But it's possible to carry the name without living the name.

And Elimelech heard God's voice but didn't listen to it. The Bible tells us that in these days of the judges, there was a famine in the land.

And yet the man who carried the name, my God is King, didn't respond to the kingly voice of God speaking in the famine.

God had said long before this that He would speak to His people by famine. It was one of the ways in which He always made His voice known and heard to His people.

[8 : 35] It's a very interesting thing, for example, when you read through the book of Genesis and the great promises that were made to the patriarchs that God would give them a land. And He allowed Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to dwell in the land that was to be the inheritance of their people.

And yet they all experienced famine in the promised land. Abraham and Isaac and Jacob all experienced famine in the promised land.

Because God was speaking to them. He was reminding them that Canaan was only a symbol of something better. He was teaching them to live for a heavenly country.

For a greater inheritance than anything that they could find in this world. And here once again, the people of God in the land of promise, they are experiencing famine. God had said long, long ago, if my people turn away from me, I'll send a famine.

It's one of the things I can do. I give them their daily bread, but I can so easily and so readily keep it from them too. And He keeps the bread from them.

[9 : 42] And famine covers the land. And the cupboards become bare. And the tables are empty. And stomachs rumble. And there is no food in the land because God, the king of His people, is speaking to them.

He is calling them to repentance. He's calling them away from their self-will and from their independence. And from their doing what they see fit and what pleases them.

He's calling them to return to their king. That's the opening shot of the book of Ruth. God is speaking to His people.

He's speaking solemnly. He's speaking clearly. He's speaking with a voice that reaches into every corner of the land. And He's asking them to go down on their knees and to repent of their self-will and of their independence.

To stop living in their own strength and to stop living by their own resources. And to return to Him, to the king that He is. I wonder tonight, do any of us in here need to hear that voice of God speaking to us in the Bible and reaching into the very recesses of our soul where we're doing what pleases ourselves.

[11 : 02] And God is saying to us, I want you to repent of that. I want you to repent of it now. I want you to repent of it now.

The end of it now. So that we will return to Him. Well, what happened? Many of you will be familiar with the narrative.

Let's trace the story of Naomi from that point. I know that in many ways she has to follow her husband. But she does what so many others are doing at this point.

The first thing that happens is this. That she goes to Moab. They went to Moab. And they lived there. That's the bold statement of verse 2.

Naomi went to Moab. Here was the voice of God in the famine. Calling them to repentance. Calling them to bow the knee. Calling them to acknowledge God.

[12 : 28] What did they do? They silenced that voice. They thought the bread was the problem.

The food was the problem. But the lack of food was only the symptom of the problem. The problem wasn't that they didn't have enough bread. The problem was that they were far away from God.

But they went to Moab because there was bread in Moab. So they went to satisfy themselves. And again they were doing what they saw fit.

Instead of turning to God. And instead of repenting. And instead of acknowledging Him. And instead of seeking Him in the time of famine. They go to Moab.

To satisfy themselves. On Moab's bread. Naomi goes to Moab. And I wonder how many of us have followed her footsteps.

[13 : 34] And instead of listening to the voice of God speaking to us in our conscience. We've tried to satisfy ourselves on so many other things.

Instead of coming and dealing with the problem. And grappling with the problem of our own estrangement from God. There was a church in the New Testament to whom Paul wrote a letter.

And to read the letter there is no trace of anything. Except vitality and health and spiritual life in that church.

The letter that Paul wrote to Ephesus is one of the most robust statements of the Christian gospel that you read anywhere in the New Testament.

There is nothing in it about divisions in Ephesus. As there were divisions in Corinth. There's nothing in it about immorality. There's nothing in it about dealing with specific issues.

[14 : 40] It's just such a clear statement of the gospel for a gospel church. But a few years later John is asked to write a letter to the same church in the same destination.

And God says in that letter that we have in the book of Revelation. I have something against you. You've lost your first love.

It's become cold. And you've wandered away from Jesus Christ. And you've focused on other things.

And you've lost the warmth and the zeal that characterized you in these early days of your Christian life and witness and profession.

My dear friend tonight, does Jesus have that to say about us? That our love for Him has grown cold?

[15 : 44] Instead of dealing with the problem of the heart and keeping close to Him and having our light and our life from Him, we've gone in other directions and we've sought our happiness in other things and we've drifted far away from God and we've gone to Moab.

And we've left the promised land because it wasn't delivering what we expected it to deliver. This was Bethlehem after all, the house of bread.

And there was no bread in it. There used to be bread in it, but not anymore. So we'll go to Moab. There's bread there. There's something to satisfy there.

Is that how it was with you? Maybe in these early moments of your Christian faith, you couldn't get enough church. Now there's too much. You couldn't get enough Bible reading.

Now a little is enough. You couldn't do enough praying. Now there's not really all that much time for prayer. Time was when you got your greatest thrill in the fellowship of the gospel and around the table of the gospel and in the company of the Christ of the gospel and with the people of God.

[17 : 09] But it's not like that now. And the house of bread has become a famine to you. And you filled your time and your life and your reading and your thinking with other things.

Naomi went to Moab. And then this chapter tells us that Naomi wept in Moab. What did Moab give her?

She went looking for bread. But instead she found herself standing over three graves.

The grave of her husband and the grave of her two sons. James tells us in the New Testament that when lust grows, it becomes sin.

And when sin develops, it becomes death. That's the path that Naomi followed.

[18 : 38] Lusting after the bread of Moab instead of returning to the God of Judah. They come down to Moab and they wander further away from God.

And they discover that along the path of disobedience and backsliding, there can only ever be death. There is no blessing to be found on the path of disobedience.

None whatsoever. To do your will I take delight. That's what Jesus said.

He never walked the path of disobedience or backsliding ever, ever, ever. He came into the world with a propensity and a desire to do the will of another.

I came down from heaven not to do my own will. It's remarkable. Of every man who ever existed, this man had the right to exercise his own will.

[19 : 51] Sometimes he did it. He said to the wind and the waves, be still. And you get a flash of the will that can do anything and the power that is unconquerable and invincible.

But this is not why he came. He didn't come to do his own will. He came to do the will of another.

And all my salvation tonight rests upon his doing the will of another. Everything I am as a believer tonight. All the preparation I need for the Lord's table.

Everything I need as far as my relationship to God is concerned hinges upon his doing the will of the God who sent him. But more than that, for me as a Christian tonight, that's the example that I am called to follow.

Tonight I am called to say, not my will, but your will be done. And if I choose any other road and walk any other path but the path of absolute subjection to the will of God for my life, then I too will weep over graves of regret and graves of remorse and graves of pain that my own sin will have caused to enter into my experience.

[21 : 23] And like Peter, I will go out and in the loneliness of my place, I will weep bitterly and wish that I'd never left Bethlehem at all.

Oh, it's a wonderful thing, this great gospel. Because tonight even for backslidden Christians, that man of Calvary who said, I didn't come to do my own will, is able to forgive all the backsliding, all the sin, that brought such pain into my experience and such loss into my life.

He's able to cover it and deal with it and send me on my way rejoicing. She went to Moab and she wept in Moab. And then she heard something in Moab.

She heard that God had come to the aid of His people. That's such a magnificent thing.

He had come to the aid of His people. He always did. He always does. He always will.

[23 : 06] How could they possibly have thought that He wouldn't? This was His history. He was always the aid-giving God.

He was the God of first aid. The first responder to every crisis of His people. He never, ever left them. Never left them to their own resources or devices.

Or if He did, always promised that He would supply their need. Underneath them would always be everlasting arms. I love that.

I love that it doesn't say, Around me are the everlasting arms. I love it that it says, Underneath me. So that no matter how far I may go down, all the way to Moab, everlasting arms are underneath me.

And they were underneath His people. At this time, He came to their aid. He gave them bread. Of course He did. He promised that He would never, ever leave His people.

[24 : 16] Doesn't the psalmist say that in one place? Don't you just love the way it's put? I have been young, and now I'm old. And of all the things that I've seen and experienced and witnessed, the psalmist says, Yet he says, Have I never seen the just man left?

I saw righteous men suffering. And I saw righteous men stumbling. And I saw righteous men sinning.

But I never saw a righteous man left alone by God. Nor did I see His seed begging bread.

God always met the need. God always made the provision. Out of the abundance of His supply, He always came to the aid of His people.

And Naomi heard in Moab that back in Bethlehem, the place was full of bread. Fields were swaying. The corn in the field was rippling and growing, and there was bread enough and to spare in her father's house while she perished in Moab with hunger.

[25 : 47] And tonight, in my father's house, there is bread enough and to spare.

I wonder tonight, where you are in relation to God, if you're not a Christian, then your soul is starving.

Nothing has a greater appetite than the soul of man. And you can put anything you like into it, and it will always ask for more.

And it will always take more. And you can put the whole world into it. The soul of man is large enough to take the whole world.

But the whole world isn't large enough to fill it. But the bread of life in Jesus Christ, that can satisfy the hungry soul.

[26 : 57] You come to Jesus if you haven't done so before. To the table of the gospel. As you are, come to Him as He is.

Take Him. Trust Him. Feed on Him. And see if He will not satisfy you the way He satisfies every sinner who comes to Him.

And if you've wandered away from Him tonight, and if you're backslidden, you know it, nobody else knows it, God knows it. Then I hope and pray that in the gospel, you too will hear that God has visited His people.

And you can come back to that God. And you can return to the house of bread. So then, Naomi left Moab.

Having heard that there was bread in Bethlehem, she left Moab. And she left Moab with her daughters-in-law, with Orpah and Ruth. And along the road they went. And Naomi tests them, tells them to go back.

[28 : 10] Should she have done that? I'm not so sure that she should. But whether she should have or not, it certainly was the test that discriminated between these two women.

because Orpah, who shed her own tears along the road, went back to Moab and her gods.

And when Naomi said to Ruth, you go back too, she said, don't ask me to do that. Don't ask me to go back. She's got something new in her life, this Moabites.

It's remarkable just how often Ruth is mentioned with her full designation, Ruth the Moabites. We never forget where she was from, who she was, what her origins were.

Just a stranger to the God of the covenant in Moab, God had explicitly forbidden His people to have anything to do with Moab. And the man who said, whose name was, my God is king, ignored that and went to Moab.

[29 : 23] And now there's a Moabites with Ruth. And something new is working in her life that finds expression in these great words, don't urge me to leave you.

Don't ask me to go back. I know Moab is my home. That's what I'm familiar with. The gods of Moab I know. The songs of Moab I've sung.

The things of Moab I've loved. They're second nature to me. But I cannot go back. Your people will be my people.

Your God will be my God. Everything's transformed. Everything's new. What's happened? I'll tell you what's happened. The God who is king has done something kingly in her heart and worked by His grace to expel an old love and replace it with a new one.

And the great test for Ruth is that she cannot go back. Maybe there are some people tonight struggling with whether or not they are actually born again.

[30 : 50] Am I born again? What does that even mean? How can I tell? Am I born again? Maybe the simple test for you tonight is just this.

Will you go back to Moab? Can you go back? Can you leave Jesus tonight and close up your Bible and forget the gospel and go back?

Or to use the words of the Lord Himself those who were disciples in name but not in actuality when His doctrine became cutting edge and offensive and incisive many of them walked away and said this is hard.

Who can bear this? Jesus turned to the twelve and said will you also go away? Magnificently Peter just looked at Jesus and said Lord to whom shall we go?

Don't ask me to go back. Don't you just love that Old Testament law concerning the slave in Exodus 21 where if a slave had served for six years he could be offered his freedom.

[32 : 28] And you think well what slave in his right mind wouldn't take his freedom? Isn't it the one thing a slave wants more than anything else?

Just to be set free to do what he wants with his life instead of being bound to the will of his master? I'm sure many did. Many did take the opportunity to go free.

But that's not why God gave the law. God gave the law in the event that the slave might actually say but I love my master.

How can I go free? the slave who loves his master knows that freedom from his master is the greatest bondage in the world.

He knows that the best freedom for him is to remain in the service of his master. Do you see tonight that's exactly how it is if you are born again by the spirit of the living God?

[33 : 47] Tonight God comes to you in the gospel and says do you want your freedom? Do you want to be rid of the mastery of Jesus and the lordship of Christ over every square inch of your life?

Is that what you want? I tell you tonight if every instinct in you says but I love my master I won't go free give me service to him over freedom from him any time to whom can I go?

Don't urge me to go back your people will be my people and your God will be my God so Naomi left Moab with the Moabites because the God who is king against whom his people sinned is the God who is working by his sovereign grace to save sinners like Ruth doesn't justify the disobedience doesn't justify the backsliding nothing ever can you can't justify your sin by whatever good may come of it but under the hand of a sovereign God good may come of it and this good comes off

Naomi's backsliding that Ruth is brought to Bethlehem what a remarkable glorious God this is he is king working salvation in the midst of the earth but I want just to say this too Naomi carries the scars of her backsliding I went out full she says and the Lord brought me back empty I wonder tonight if that's how you're approaching this communion season saying well

I was once full but events in my life and events in my providence and sins and backslidings they've all emptied me so much don't call me Naomi which means pleasant call me Mara which means bitter that's how I feel the Lord has been and he's emptied me of everything good don't you feel like that sometimes but you know there's a blessing and being emptied because if you're emptied then you can be filled again God empties Naomi so that he can fill her again and her whole life is going to be transformed so that at the end of the story she'll be able to say don't call me anymore

[37 : 46] Mara call me Naomi I think it's going to be a bit like that when we get to heaven there are times in this world where we say don't call me Naomi call me Mara it's been bitter and hard and difficult and I've been emptied but then we'll cross the threshold of that glorious city at last and we'll say don't call me Mara anymore it was all for the good all with a blessing all for a purpose all these events woven together by God the King for my good and his glory and the blessings of his salvation trust not the

Lord by feeble sense judge not the Lord by feeble sense but trust him for his grace behind each frowning providence he hides a smiling face and his face is smiling on Naomi even when she thinks it's been hard and bitter and so it was and she only had herself to blame but what a remarkable close to a remarkable chapter she returned from Moab with Ruth God has a remarkable way of fishing and taking sinners on his hook and reeling them in that's the business he's in and it's a great thing tonight to be caught up in his story and to know his blessing wherever you are in relation to him tonight never forget just how full his table is and if you love him and he's yours and tonight you're weeping over your backslidings and repenting over your sins and seeking him then you will know his blessing and you will know his peace and I trust that we will all know it as we prepare for his day and for his table let's build heads in prayer lecture