

Ruth

Sermon #1: Redeeming Loss

Ruth 1:1-22

Kevin Maurice ---- February 12, 2023

In the late 1800s there lived a man named Horatio Spafford. He was a successful and wealthy lawyer living in Chicago. He was married and had four daughters. He took most of his wealth and invested into real estate. And then the Great Chicago Fire burned most of the city to ash. And Horatio and his family suffered profound financial loss. And so, for the next two years, he worked every single day just trying to recover and recoup what had been lost. And then finally one day he said, “It’s time for a family vacation. I’ve missed so much of life with my wife and my daughters and their lives.” And so, he booked a cruise ship for them to go and travel to Europe and explore the continent—the SS Ville du Havre.

Days before the voyage Horatio was called back to Chicago on business, but he sent his family ahead, hoping to catch another ship in the next day or so. And that’s when the greatest tragedy of his life took place. The ship that his entire world was on collided with a smaller vessel in the Atlantic Ocean, and within minutes had sunk beneath the waves.

This was the 1800s—there was no twenty-four-hour news cycle, so Horatio had heard the ship had sunk, but he had no idea if anyone had survived. And so, he waited seven excruciating days before he finally received a telegram. It was from his wife. It’s difficult to make out some of the words, but perhaps you can see the first two: “Saved alone.” All four of their daughters had drowned. Horatio’s wife was recovering in a hospital in England, so he went to be with her. And on his own voyage across the Atlantic the captain of the ship he was on approached him on deck one day to tell him that they would soon be crossing the very spot where the Ville du Havre had sunk—the place in the ocean where he had lost most of his family.

Horatio says that he looked out over the black depth of the ocean and he prayed a prayer. He said it was a prayer of immense sorrow. Then he went back to his cabin, he took out a pen and some paper, and he wrote down these famous words:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

I've always loved that old hymn. But knowing the story, having daughters myself, it is unimaginable to me that a human being could write those words after experiencing that kind of loss. How do you do that? I would be wrestling with so many questions like, *God, why would You allow this to happen? Where were You? Where are You right now when You feel so far away? God, how do I go on after this?*

We're going to explore those questions and more as we begin a three-week study together in the Book of Ruth. Now the Book of Ruth in the Bible is in many ways ordinary. And what I mean by that is that it's not like another Old Testament book of the Bible that's named after a woman—the Book of Esther. Because the Book of Esther is about an extraordinary woman, a queen, in an extraordinary place, living in a palace, in an extraordinary time when there's this countdown, this ticking clock, until the annihilation of her people. And so, Esther must choose to do something extraordinary. She risks her life.

Ruth is not that story. It just isn't. Ruth is a story of ordinary people in an ordinary place at an ordinary time doing ordinary things. And that's good for us. It's good for me, because I'm an ordinary individual living a fairly ordinary life. And what we're going to see is that in many ways the Book of Ruth is our story. Because the Book of Ruth is the story of God moving, even when we don't think He's there. It's a story for people who ask, "Where is God when He's not showing up in dramatic ways?" It's for people who wonder where God was when tragedy interrupted their lives. It's a story for people who can't imagine that anything good could possibly come from their loss. It's a great story. It's a gospel story.

So, over these next three weeks we're going to explore this book by studying three different people in it: a woman named Naomi, a woman named Ruth, and then a man named Boaz. Because God chooses these ordinary people at this ordinary time in this ordinary place to do something extraordinary.

And so, the first point of application today is simply to read the Book of Ruth. Read the Book of Ruth. It's four chapters long, eighty-five verses. You can read it in less time than I'm going to spend talking about it today. Read it over and over several times over these next few

weeks. Listen to it on your Bible app. Maybe pick two or three different translations and read it in that way. Read it out loud at night with your kids, or read it with your roommate. Or journal it—write it out. But please, don't let me just tell you about the Book of Ruth. Read it for yourself. Let's immerse ourselves in the story.

Ruth 1:1-5

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. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chillion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. And they went into the country of Moab and remained there.

³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They 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 Chillion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

And so now, would you please go ahead and open your Bibles and join me in Ruth chapter 1. The first verse in this book introduces us to the story. It says, "In the day when the judges ruled ..." That first sentence tells us a lot—"When the judges ruled." And the Bible immediately preceding the Book of Ruth is the Book of Judges. And it ends with this verse. "In those days there was no king in Israel, and so everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

So that's the context for our story. It's a lawless time, it's the Wild West. Everyone just does whatever they want to do. "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. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chillion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. And they went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. They took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chillion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband."

In chapter 1 we're going to focus our attention on this woman named Naomi. And as we explore some of her story, we're going to see three things about loss: suffering loss, lamenting loss, and redeeming loss. That's our outline this morning.

Suffering Loss

What does it feel like? How do we feel when we suffer loss? How do we think of ourselves and how do we think about God when we lament this great loss? And in the end, how in the world could something so devastating possibly be redeemed?

Naomi is someone, as we've just seen, who suffered significant loss. In these first five verses alone she suffers a minimum of five things. Naomi and her husband built a life together in Israel, but then there's this famine and a drastic economic downturn. Food is scarce. Things that are luxuries are gone, things that are necessities are insufficient. And so, any sort of security that they have is gone. That's her first loss.

Have you experienced the loss of security? Maybe you've lost a job and you know the turmoil that job loss brings, because your days just aren't spent like they used to be. And you fill out application after application and you're just hoping for an initial interview, and then there's this interminable waiting. And each day as you dip into your savings and that number goes a little lower, that anxiety grows a little higher. And overnight the kids' day care and gymnastics and all these other things become line items that you have to cut just to continue to put gas in the tank. The loss of security is real.

So, this couple make the difficult decision to move, and not just down the street. They move to a foreign country. They leave their land. And now they've lost something else. They've lost their home—not just a roof and walls, but their place in the world, their community, their neighborhood, their sense of identity. It's gone like that.

Have you ever been forced to move? Maybe think back to when you were a kid and your parents told you, "We're moving." And it felt like such a tremendous loss, because it wasn't just your house and your street and your school. Because when you move, often it means you lose everything. You lose family that live nearby, you lose your friends, you lose familiarity. This family, at least, still have each other ... until after the move. And then Naomi's husband dies.

Have you ever lost someone close to you? Life just kind of becomes surreal. This person who was right here—you now talk about them in the past tense. And suddenly you're making

decisions and you're having conversations with people you don't even know, talking about flower arrangements and music and programs and memorial service details.

And Lord willing, you have someone to help you through that—family or friends or a church body. But anyone who's lost someone will tell you that after the phone stops ringing, after people stop knocking at your door, that loss lingers. You still feel it every day.

Or maybe you've experienced the death of a relationship, a breakup or a divorce, the loss of what was once considered a dear friend. There was this closeness that's now severed. And in that space between all you feel is empty. Do you know that feeling?

Naomi does. But she still has her boys. And they get married, and now surely family becomes Naomi's future hope. She'll be the matriarch. She'll be grandma. That's the vision of life she can cling to. But the Bible tells us that her sons are married for ten years, and after ten years they and their wives have no children. Have you experienced that kind of hurt?

Maybe you and your husband have tried for years, you've visited all the doctors, you've prayed and prayed, but no child ever arrived. Or maybe you even tried waiting to adopt and you've done all the paperwork and you've done all the training, but year after year you're still just waiting.

Naomi's living with all of those feelings, and then tragedy strikes again. And this time she loses both of her sons. She's lost security, her home, her husband, and now she loses both children. And that is a tragic, awful, terrible thing. And I know there are some of you who have mourned this type of loss too.

Naomi is a woman who endures tremendous tragedy. And her story is our story. Because all of us living in a broken world will lose something or someone. And maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life, you will experience loss.

And this is why, I believe, God gives us the Book of Ruth. He didn't have to include it in the Bible. He chose to because it's so real and it connects with us. Because if our lives and our stories don't connect with the Scriptures, then all of this is just a story about some people who lived a long, long time ago. But if our lives connect with their lives and our stories connect with their stories, then perhaps we can see that if God was at work in their lives, then it's true that He could be at work in ours too.

We are guaranteed loss. It is part of the terms and conditions of being alive on this planet. We're going to suffer loss. And when we do, how do we process it? What do we do with all of

those emotions? How do we handle them? I want you to watch and see how Naomi laments her loss.

Lamenting Loss

One day she hears that the famine back home has ended. The Bible says that the Lord had visited His people and given them food. So, Naomi decides it's time to go home. But she turns to her daughters-in-law, the only family she has now, and she tells them, "Go. Go home, go back to your parents. Maybe there's hope you could get married again. But get away from me, because you're better off without me."

Ruth 1:11-13

"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."

The women protest. They say, "No, we want to stay with you." But Naomi doubles down. And in verse 11 she says, "Turn back, my daughters. Why would you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 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 bear sons, would you wait until they were grown? Would you 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."

It is exceeding bitter to me that the hand of God is against me. The first time that we hear Naomi lament, she says, "God did this to me."

At this, one of the two daughters-in-law goes home. But the other one, Ruth, refuses. Ruth remains. Ruth will not leave. So, she and Naomi go back to Israel. They get back to

Naomi's hometown, and when they get back there, Naomi laments her loss a second time. And here's what she says.

Ruth 1:19-21

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 [of the town] said, "Is this Naomi?"

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?"

"So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town were stirred because of them. And the women of the town said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 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?'"

Do you see what Naomi's saying? *My life has been filled with suffering, loss after loss after loss after loss. And it's all God's fault.* She places all of the blame and the responsibility on God Almighty. *He has done this.*

Let's just sit with here for moment. And let's appreciate how high a view Naomi has of the sovereignty of God. Because she believes that God is all powerful, that He is in control, and that He is on the throne. To her God is not some distant, far away deity who is asleep at the wheel. No way. She knows that God is in control. This is a deep theology of the sovereignty of God. And she's right.

Ultimately, God is in control of the things that take place in life, even the hard things. He is sovereign. That means He's not held captive by bad things happening. He doesn't just sit back and watch idly by as catastrophe strikes. God may not cause terrible things to happen, but biblically, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is that He knows about them. He allows them.

He even ordains them as part of His plan in the universe. And I know that is such a heavy statement. It's one of the most difficult truths that you encounter over and over in the Bible. And it's here in Ruth 1. God is not distant. He is in control and He has a plan.

Naomi is right to believe that. But here's where she's wrong. She says, *God is in control and He's against me. God must be against me.* Naomi's view of God has been eclipsed by her suffering. The sun is still there, but it's obscured. It's blocked out. And she can't see it. And so, her world is dark.

So, she still believes that God is mighty; He's just not good.

God is powerful, but not personal.

He's in control, but He doesn't care.

God is a king who is not kind.

Have you ever felt that way?

Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not "So there's no God after all," but "So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer."

--- C. S. Lewis

When his wife was dying of cancer, C. S. Lewis began journaling his feelings, and his writing was later turned into a book called *A Grief Observed*. And in it Lewis wrestles with this big question: Where is a sovereign God in the midst of loss and suffering and death? And in a moment of true emotion, he wrote this: "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'"

For Lewis, for Naomi, their loss has not shaken their belief in God's existence. But it has shattered their belief in His goodness.

Application #1: Learn to Lament

Let's just pause here for a moment and apply truth to this idea of lamenting loss. Because Naomi's grieving. She's mourning, she's crying out to God. And she is not saying completely true things about Him. But what she's doing is lamenting. Lament is this significant spiritual practice in the lives of God's people, and you see it throughout the Bible. It's this raw, honest, unfiltered, tearful prayer to Him. Lament is saying that the world is not as it ought to be. And lament is okay. We should learn to lament.

In the Old Testament, a man named Job laments. Job suffers tremendous loss, as much as Naomi and more. And for thirty-five chapters his friends talk at him. And they keep coming back to this idea: "You must have done something wrong. God is angry with you and against you. So curse God. Be done with Him. Turn your back on Him and just go on."

And Job's reply is "Just let me lament. Let me grieve and work out my emotions—not away from God, but with Him."

King David writes so many laments. They're all over the Book of Psalms. In one of them he says, "I have cried out to me, God, but You didn't answer me! I've tried to look for You, but You turned Your face away from me."

Jesus quotes these Psalms and then on the cross Jesus himself laments and cries out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me!?"

When we experience loss, it's okay. It's good to acknowledge This is not how I wanted life to go. I dreamed a dream my life would be so different from this hell that I'm living.

Lament asks: *How could this happen? Why would this happen? God, why would You allow this?* And it is okay to ask, *God, where are You?* That's biblical lament.

It is not disloyal to God. It is not sinful to say or ask those things. Spiritual maturity, a relationship with God, is not just having all the right thoughts and knowledge about Him. It's about bringing all of your thoughts, all of your emotions, all of your being to Him. And sometimes God just wants us to come to Him with what we feel, not just with what we think we should feel. Because God can handle your grief. He absolutely can. He is big enough to listen to and to take your fear and your doubt and your confusion, and yes, even your anger and your blame.

So share it with God. How are you hurting? How are you angry? How are you becoming bitter? Do you really think that God isn't big enough to handle your emotion? Because if you believe that, then your God is too small. Because the God that we see in Scripture is there waiting, saying, *Just bring it to me. Give that to me. I want that part of you too.* You don't have to hide your lament from Him. That's our first application.

Application #2: We Can't Live in Lament

Our second is this. We can't live in lament. We need to learn to lament, but don't live in lament. Because if you do, you become bitter. Just look at Naomi. She suffers loss, she laments her loss, but then she begins to live in it, and it affects her view of God. It alters how she sees herself. And yes, Naomi's been so profoundly marred by loss. But she gets home and people are saying, "Hey, Naomi's back!" And she stops them. She says, "No, do not call me Naomi. That means 'pleasant' or 'sweet.' That's a grandma name and that's not me, because I've lost my sons, I've lost my husband, I've lost everything. Don't call me 'pleasant,' call me Mara"—which is a Hebrew word that means "bitter."

Naomi's living in her lament. And she so identifies with her loss that it's become her identity. She said, "God's dealing bitterly with me, so you might as well call me 'bitter.'" And she is, and it colors everything about her worldview. Because when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Bitterness makes you look at everything through a lens of bitterness, and it can make you self-pitying and self-absorbed, and you become myopic. And all you can see is how bad you have it. Naomi says, *I can only see myself through a lens of loss, and that's how I want you to look at me too.* And if we're not careful, we live in lament and we let our lives be defined by loss.

And if you do that, if it becomes your entire worldview, you're likely going to miss what God is doing or what He's going to do with your loss. Let me show you Naomi misses this. She says, "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?"

She says, "I went away full." Did she? Yes, she had her family, but didn't she leave because of a famine? And then she says, "The Lord has brought me back empty." I'm all alone. Is she?

Ruth 1:22

So Naomi returned and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law was with her.

I love that the narrator, the author of the Book of Ruth, doesn't let Naomi off the hook here. Look at the very next verse. "So Naomi returned and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law was with her."

Naomi, you're not empty, because there's someone standing right next to you. Her name's Ruth. Ruth chose to stay with you. Ruth, who has also experienced great loss—remember, her husband—she has no children. She's choosing to go with her mother-in-law, and by making that choice she's going to lose her home and her family. And Naomi can't even see it. Naomi says, "Call me bitter. I'm empty and I'm alone." But standing right next to her is this woman who has sworn to go with her to the very end.

Redeeming Loss

Ruth 1:16-17

But Ruth replied, "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."

That's why we can't live in lament. Because we might miss the things that God is doing to redeem our loss. And Ruth is the first key to how God is going to do that in this story. Because when she chose to follow Naomi, Ruth vowed: "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. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more if anything but death parts me from you.”

Ruth makes this beautiful oath to Naomi. She’s swearing a covenant. That’s what that is. She’s saying, *I’m unconditionally committed to you. And I’m going to give up everything, even what little I have left. I’ll give it all up to be with you and to go with you.* This is a steadfast commitment of unwavering love.

And Ruth, standing there, right next to Naomi, should stand like a lighthouse for us in the middle of what has been an incredibly dark story. Ruth is one of three total lights in the darkness for us as Christians, signposts in this story pointing us to how God is possibly going to redeem. Ruth is one. Let me show you the other two.

Ruth 1:22

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

Remember back in verse one we learned there was a famine in the land? Go to the final verse of Ruth now. “And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of a barley harvest ...” Do you see that? There was a famine. Now it’s harvest season. Something is growing. Something living is springing out of this soil that everyone thought was dead. It’s harvest time. We’re going to talk more about that next week, but that’s light number two.

Light number three in the story is this. Remember where we are. Where is this taking place? It’s Bethlehem.

*Oh, little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie.
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

That Bethlehem which will re-enter the story years later when another young woman travels to town to give birth to a son. Bethlehem signifies to us that the story of Ruth is part of a greater story of redemption.

We have Bethlehem, we have a barley harvest, and then, remember, we have Ruth herself.

And Ruth's love and loyalty point us to the greater love and loyalty of God. Because Naomi didn't have anything to offer Ruth. But Ruth chose to love her and go with her. You and I don't have anything to offer God. But He chooses to love us.

Ruth leaves Moab to go to Bethlehem to be with Naomi.

Jesus steps down from heaven to be born in Bethlehem to be with us.

Ruth is a shadow of our Savior. She's a picture of Jesus.

And Jesus isn't just some balm to soothe the feelings of loss. He came so that ultimately, all loss might be redeemed in Him.

God does not promise us an easy life. But he does promise us a redeemed life, and that through His Son. And He promises us that He will be with us always, even to the end of the age.

And He can do that. He can be with us, and we can be with Him. Because God is not just a God of people who suffer loss. God is a God who himself suffers loss.

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the one Nietzsche ridiculed as "God on the cross." In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside His immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us.

--- John Stott

The Anglican priest John Stott wrote it this way: "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the one that Nietzsche ridiculed as 'God on the cross.' In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside His immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood and tears and death. He suffered for us."

He suffered for us.

Do you wonder why God would put a story like this in the Bible? It's an ordinary story. Ordinary people, an ordinary place, an ordinary time, dealing with loss—something that is tragically ordinary. But what we see in Naomi's life and in Ruth's steadfast love and loyalty is that there are no people, no places, no times, no actions that are too small or too ordinary for the work of God that He is accomplishing through Jesus the Christ.

So, why does Naomi's story matter? Because she's us. You and I are so much like her. We experience loss.

And God wants us to see that there's a good way to lament our loss. We can come to Him. We can trust Him and say that He's in control, even through tears, while at the same time avoiding the pit of bitterness. And God is working and redeeming our loss, sometimes right in front of us—even if we can't see it. And His final plan, His ultimate plan, is to redeem all things through Jesus.

So, that even when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever your lot, whatever your loss in life, we can turn to God and through tears of anguish we can cry out, "God, You've taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well, with my soul'—because of who You are, because of what Jesus has done."

Would you please pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we come before you, and for some of us, this truth of loss is far too real. It's too recent, it's too new. So, God, I pray that You would be with us, that You would comfort us, that You would sit with us in those feelings of grief. God, help us turn to You to bring our lament to You—not to turn away, not to grow cold or callous or bitter—but to turn to You with our questions, our hopes, and our fears.

God, remind us that You love us so much that You sent Your Son for us, that You would suffer for us, to be with us. Help us to simply be with You. And remind us of the truths of Your love and Your plan even when we can't see it.

So, we pray these things in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.