

So today, we're in the Book of Ruth, and the most noticeable thing about this book is how different it is to the books that come before and after it, and how short this little book is, at just four chapters with 84, 85 verses.

Yet within the Book of Ruth is a story, a narrative, so richly woven and beautifully told, that rather than be lost among the events that come before and after it, Ruth is a well to return to and drink from over and over again.

Its message is profound and its place in the big story of the Bible is significant. So before we get started, let's pray. Lord, we're just thankful for all your provision.

We think of the Thanksgiving offering and we're just thankful of your church and being your people. We just pray that it is a blessing to our community both in the church and beyond.

And as we come to Ruth today, Lord, we just pray that this word just is a real message of a reminder of your redemptive love, Lord.

I just pray that you would, yeah, it just helped me to just let your word be spoken and your message given in all the ways that it needs to go out today, Lord. And we just pray this in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

So in March, Ben, Jonathan, and Jack walked us through the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And over the last two weeks, we've been in the next two books, Joshua and Judges, with Ben.

And in Judges, in Genesis, sorry, that very first book of the Bible, we learn how God, Father, Son, and Spirit created all things out of the chaos, out of the nothing.

And at the centre of this creation was us, humanity, man and woman, created in God's image, living in perfect peace with God in this garden of life, of abundance and harmony and intimacy with the Lord. It was called Eden.

That was on page one and two of the Bible. By page three, as we know, we'd been kicked out. Instead of trusting the Lord, we were tempted by sin, by the evil one, with the idea that we could be our own ruler and creator.

And in eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that God had warned us against, we chose death instead of life. Before leaving Eden, though, God, in his kindness and love for us, promised to rescue us from the serpent, from sin and death.

That rescue plan, he told Adam and Eve, would involve an offspring, an offspring of theirs who would crush the serpent's head.

But as he did so, his heel would be struck by the serpent, a battle where evil will be cut off, but at a price to the rescuer. And so we know that this big story that we're in, the big story of the Bible, is about this rescue plan.

That God devised to redeem and restore what was lost in the Garden of Eden, our relationship with him, where we could dwell in his presence, worship him, living and working in his garden. You'd have to say that man failed in the Garden of Eden.

And in the section we've just come out of, the realisation of God's promise to Abraham of a chosen people who'd be given freedom in another garden or land, the promised land, Canaan, one could, one way they could live for as long as they worshipped

only God, you'd have to say they failed there too. And that final indictment of judges sums up where this chosen people are at. In those days we heard last week, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit.

And so that's where we find ourselves as Ruth begins. A people made in God's image, made for relationship with God, failing both times, first in the garden, second in the promised land. So Ruth is a relief from the chaos that comes with disobedience.

Instead of greed and violence, destruction, anarchy and self, we have a love story of beauty, loyalty, integrity and hope. A contrast between what humanity has become and what else it can be. And we've picked up that we've shifted literary gears.

We've moved from the battle genre that Ben spoke about in Joshua and Judges and moved to the narrative genre. It's a story, one that has all the literary features of a rich story, well told.

This story, though, isn't just a contrast with the story of God's people and their failures. It's a glimpse of how God will ultimately rescue his people through a redeemer.

A redeemer, someone who steps in, takes responsibility when you can't rescue yourself, paying the cost to restore what's been lost. The whispers of that rescue began as Adam and Eve left Eden. And here in Ruth, we see the pattern taking shape.

In a world where people repeatedly fail to live as God intends, Ruth gives us characters who respond in faith, show loyalty and flow through when given the opportunity to do good. Ruth is not a different story from the rest of the Bible.

It's a preview of the story that God has been telling all along. Ruth offers a glimpse of the solution before the problem of disobedience has really fully played out. The Bible story will continue to reveal humanity's inability to rescue itself.

But here we are given an early picture of the Redeemer's work.

And in this Christ in Scripture project that we're in, I think the absolute gold is that the Book of Ruth foreshadows the story of our ultimate Kingsman Redeemer Jesus, while also being part of his story itself.

So we know this is a narrative, a story, and we're going to follow the narrative arc or shape of the story and see what the Lord has for us. This is what it looked like for me. Ruin, return, revelation, redemption, restoration, and the royal line.

So let's start with ruin. We learn in Chapter 1 in the days when the judges ruled that El-Emilek and Naomi leave their country for Moab because of famine confirming that this story sits within the biggest story of Israel.

But it also shows us that Yahweh cares about the nation, but also about the people in it. Within 10 years of landing in Moab, Naomi has experienced unimaginable loss. Much of it unsaid, but there if we look.

In leaving Bethlehem in Judah, they leave their land, their extended family and their community. Many of you have done that yourselves and know much more than me of all the loss in such a move.

They somehow find a place to live, but there's no familiar community. And then Elimelech dies, and Naomi's left with her two sons. A huge loss.

Now a widow, she does have some hope of the future via her sons. Her sons marry Moabite women. No Israelite women in Moab, I think.

So a loss again there. Then the earlier death is compounded by the deaths of her sons, both without children, and she's left alone. Left alone with her two Moabite daughters-in-law.

The death of her sons confirms the death of the family line. No living sons of her own, no grandchildren to carry the family name and claim the family land. Name and land, both important aspects of Jewish identity.

Naomi has lost everything. She's a widow without means, and unlikely to find those means again in the future. In those days, especially in that foreign place, she's vulnerable.

We're not told about the state of Elimelech and Naomi's relationship with the Lord at all, really. We do know that life failed to flourish, though, and by this stage, it's hardly survival.

The head of the family has died and the young husbands, both without heirs. Names are important in this story, so let's go back to verse one for a minute.

Elimelech, which means my god is king, and his wife Naomi, which means pleasant, favour, sweetness, left Bethlehem, which means house of bread, because of the famine there.

So my god is king, and favour are leaving the house of bread to go to, to where? To Moab, Moab. A place that is seen historically as hostile towards God's people.

It's an interesting choice. And don't miss the reference to Bethlehem, the place of Jesus' birth. There's an irony implied here that hints at a lack of trust on Elimelech and Naomi's part.

It appears that rather than trust and wait for the Lord's provision, they leave Bethlehem and they leave for a country hostile to their people.

Yes, all this is hinted at rather than stated, but we do know that their dream for a better life is well and truly in ruins. And Naomi's left to manage the fallout, the future of Ruth and Orpah, her Moabite daughters-in-law as well as her own.

That's tough at a time when she most likely wants to curl up into a ball and die herself. She has others for whom she's responsible for. And I think that sometimes is what we find when a dream dies.

It's not only the dream that is lost, but all the aftermath that comes when a dream dies. A return to the parts of the present that remain, but are now much harder to imagine. Other relationships that need to be sorted, now more complex than before.

A different place to live that requires effort to arrange. Roles and responsibilities once filled by others that have to be taken on. A different rhythm, a shift in expectations between those who remain.

And nothing left to give to these huge emotional demands. I think that's where Naomi finds herself in this part of the story. I wonder if you've ever found yourself there before.

It may be true of you now. If not, it's very likely to be at some stage in the future. So let's pay attention to how it plays out.

Return. Just when all looks bleak, Naomi hears something. When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepare to return home from there.

The Lord in his kindness gives Naomi a scarik of hope. And what does she do? She acts.

I love this. The Lord calls, she responds. It's a great pattern.

He calls, we respond. Call and response. He loves it when we respond.

The other word for it is obedience. Or as Jesus puts it, your kingdom come, your will be done. It doesn't look like much.

We don't even know how she heard it, but that's not important. The Lord throws out some hope and Naomi answers in return. That's relationship.

Obedience unlocks something in the spiritual realm, creating with God spaces. And she's not responding even from a place of strong faith or confidence. She's likely broken, exhausted, disappointed, angry, grieving, empty, confused.

She'll soon call herself Mara, bitter. Yet she still responds. Naomi's obedience comes before her understanding.

She responds and returns to Bethlehem before she can see what God is doing. And I think this is the turning point of her story. This call and response is significant.

It's a leaning in, a grace for Naomi when she's lost so much, but also a grace for her when perhaps she's not been listening to the Lord. I'm reminded of the description of Jesus from Luke, as he traveled through the towns teaching and healing.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Naomi is essentially alone, helpless.

She needs a shepherd and she responds or answers back to this news of God's provision with obedience. Have you ever experienced that in your own life? You might be someone who feels like God is far away or you're far away from God.

Do you remember earlier in the year when we looked at the Gospels? God takes on human flesh and we're told to repent or turn towards God for his kingdom is near. Jesus is always near, but he doesn't push in.

Turning toward him can be as simple as listening, looking for his presence, saying a small yes to him. It's the action that matters, the response, the obedience in the moment.

We respond and he calls again, respond again, and the relationship begins to breathe in ways that bring life from something that felt dead or hopeless. The shepherd wants to look after his sheep.

So Naomi returns with her daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabite to Bethlehem. Originally, both daughters-in-law set out to return with Naomi, but she urges them to go back to their mother's homes and find rest in the home of another husband.

Orpah acts as a foil or a contrast to Ruth. Where Orpah agrees reluctantly to going back to her people and her gods, Ruth is determined to go with Naomi. Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.

Where you go, I will go. And where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people.

And your God, your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried.

May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

The use of Orpah as a foil highlights the extraordinary nature of Ruth's commitment. Orpah chooses the reasonable path, returning to her family, her people, and her future in Moab. Ruth chooses the costly path.

She leaves behind her homeland, her security, her people, her gods, and she binds herself to Naomi and to Naomi's god. And in doing that, she opens herself up to a new identity and future. We realize, though, that the return will cost Naomi.

She's grieving a huge loss and she's angry at god. She also has to endure a commentary from the women in the town. Like a Shakespearean chorus, they assemble and call.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, can this be Naomi? I was trying to imagine how they had said that. The tone really changes it.

But I think it probably wasn't necessarily generous. Her response, don't call me Naomi, pleasant. She told them, call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.

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

The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. But she doesn't shy away from her pain and grief. Her honesty here, I think, allows her to really begin to grieve all the losses she's experienced.

Naomi places the blame for her travails firmly on God, and he can take it, warranted or not. And I think that's good for us to acknowledge, and it's a pointer for us. We have a God who sees us and knows us.

He wants us to cry out in pain and anger, and as we've said before, feel the feelings. He can manage our anger, our hurt and pain, and even putting the blame on him is okay. He can work with this.

He comforts the broken hearted, not just when we cry quietly, but loud, ugly, snotty crying, and yelling and railing against all the hurt, because it's expression, and that's communication, and that's relationship.

So if you're like Naomi and you've lost a dream, a dream of a future you thought was yours, or you're still living in the aftermath of a dream that died, and that feels empty, and so very hard, I'd encourage you to feel those feelings, and express

them to him. We can say all the things we need to say to the Lord, and he'll be okay.

Remember Jesus suffered death on a cross, an excruciating death, but more than that, he was separated from his father, experiencing the consequences of the sin of the whole world. Pain is not new to him.

His compassion for us comes from much of that experience of suffering, and his comfort, that's a balm, a salve for the soul that is like no other, because it's a spiritual balm that can meet us in our suffering, not to suppress our expression of it,

but to experience it with us and alongside us, and he meets us where we are, in the small things and the big things, expressed once or revisited over and over. And that being with me gives something that like suffering is beyond words.

Come to me, he says, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I'm gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

So what is Naomi returning to Bethlehem for? Food, certainly, shelter, perhaps, familiar people. Like the prodigal son, she's looking for the bare minimum.

But throughout Scripture, God proves to be far more generous than his people imagine. He does not merely provide enough to survive. He delights in restoring, renewing and blessing.

Naomi returns seeking provision. God is bringing her and Ruth home for far more than that. He's a generous God and he is so glad when we return to him.

Jesus says, the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I've come that they may have life and have it to the full. That's what he promises us, not to patch something up, but to create more than we could imagine.

And so Naomi hands the baton over to Ruth and Ruth and Boaz step on to centre stage. Revelation. The direction the story takes now is revealed firstly to us, the reader.

We're told about Boaz, a man of standing from the clan, of Elamitic, before any of the characters meet him.

Then, it's going to be hard to air, quote, then as it turned out, Ruth chooses his field to glean in and soon after, just then, in fact, Boaz arrives and notices Ruth. To Naomi and Ruth, these story beats appear encouraging, but ordinary.

However, we're showing it because we can already see that God is quietly arranging the circumstances. These characters see coincidence, but the narrator wants us to see providence.

We're invited to watch God at work in the revelation of Boaz and the emergence of God's provision.

The Ruth-Boaz exchange in the field reveals Ruth as humble, hard-working, courageous, but more than that, I don't think she left Moab seeking better future prospects.

Despite Naomi's own sense that the Lord had afflicted her, Ruth sees in Naomi something of her relationship with the Lord, and she wants it too.

And in turn, Boaz sees this in Ruth, saying to her in that first meeting, may you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge. Little did he know the role he would play in that blessing.

And this man who Naomi reveals a little later to be a guardian redeemer of their family is kind, generous, protective of the vulnerable, and a man of integrity.

He shows these qualities in the way he treats his workers before he even interacts with Ruth, showing that these qualities are not reserved for special occasions. They're woven into his everyday life.

Character is often revealed in the everyday moments. Ruth's humility and faithfulness and servant heart informs all she does. Before Boaz becomes a redeemer, he's already a good employer, a generous landowner, and a godly man.

As God unfolds his purposes in Ruth and in our own lives, he does so through ordinary people who respond to him.

God is the redeemer, but he delights to do the work through people whose hearts are open to him, people who are willing to trust him, obey him, and to take the next faithful step.

Redemption. So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished, and she lived with her mother-in-law. There's a rhythm and sense of peace in the provision this arrangement provides for the two women.

But Naomi is aware that provision will come to an end with the harvest. So there's an urgency to act and find a home for Ruth, where she will be well provided for. And as readers, I think we become a little uneasy with Naomi's plan.

A vulnerable young woman, a threshing floor, and a meeting under the cover of darkness. It sounds risky. Around them, we know people are repeatedly doing what is right in their own eyes.

We watch closely. Will Boaz prove different? Will he act with integrity when no one's watching?

Will he pursue redemption at personal cost? And we see he does both and more. Ruth requests to Boaz to spread the corner of your garment over me since you are a guardian, redeemer of our family is a big moment.

She's asking him to claim her family as his own, to give them covenant protection and provision. Boaz responds with honour, deep appreciation, and a wholehearted commitment to act. The Lord bless you, my daughter, he replied.

This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier. You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid.

I will do for you all you ask. And the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true, I am a guardian redeemer of our family.

There is another who is more closely related than I. Stay here for the night and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian redeemer, good, let him redeem you. But if he's not willing, as surely as the Lord lives, I will do it.

Boaz consistently chooses the righteous path over the easy path. He protects Ruth, preserves her dignity and commits himself to pursuing her redemption, even though it'll cost him.

And I think this is where we see Christ in this Scripture so powerfully. Boaz points us to Jesus and gives us hope that there is one who can redeem me and redeem all I've lost. Like Boaz, Jesus willingly embraces the cost of redemption.

Unlike Boaz, he bears that cost completely.

Restoration. We learn that the first guardian redeemer quickly declines the opportunity to redeem his relative Naomi and her family's name and land.

A foil or contrast to the selfless Boaz, the first guardian redeemer considers the cost and steps away. Boaz considers the cost and steps in. Boaz embraces the opportunity.

He understands the responsibility, appreciates the significance of what is at stake, and willingly accepts the cost to redeem Naomi's family.

He purchases the land, marries Ruth, and acts to preserve the name and future of a family that would otherwise disappear. Once again, Boaz points us beyond himself. Jesus knows exactly what redemption will cost him and willingly embraces it.

Boaz redeems at significant personal cost, but Jesus, as we said, at a price we'll never really be able to fully appreciate. Through Boaz, Naomi and Ruth receive a restored inheritance, family, and a future.

The beautiful and mysterious thing about Jesus is that as my redeemer, I'm part of his family and he's redeemed my relationship to our heavenly father, the one that was lost back in the garden. And restoration is not only for the future.

His spirit now lives in me and slowly begins to restore all my brokenness, including the lifeless dreams and hopes that have been lost along the way. And it's the now and not yet. Now he is restoring me.

One day he will restore all things, including me, fully.

The royal line. What I love about Jesus, my redeemer, is that he does more than we could ever imagine. And we see that in the Book of Ruth, too.

He shows us these two vulnerable, broken women. They are redeemed and restored in ways they could never have imagined. Not only do they survive, they flourish and they become part of the big story themselves.

Because Ruth gives birth to Obed, who is the grandfather of King David. And from King David's line comes Jesus, redeemer of the world. And our Shakespearean chorus of women, this time say it well.

Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel. He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age.

For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth. Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, Naomi has a son.

And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Jesus was and is the long-awaited rescuer and redeemer.

Because God loved us so much, he sent the only one who could do the job of redeeming, the one who was perfect, righteous and holy, his son Jesus.

So Jesus entered the world as a baby, lived a perfect life, telling and teaching all he met about the kingdom of God. And then he died an innocent death, taking the sin of the world with him.

Separated from his father, he bore these sins and paid the price for us, a debt that we cannot repay because of our sin. And so the good news is that his perfect sacrifice enabled him to conquer death and rise again.

Rising again, he appeared to many, and after 40 days, he went back to be with his father in heaven. But he left us with a gift, his own spirit, available to all who confess their sins and believe in him. Sorry.

A spirit that reshapes our hearts, renews our minds, and breathes life into all that is broken so that we can bring glory to him, testifying to others that he is our redeemer and saviour and the way to the Father both for now and for eternity.

If you haven't really heard that before and something in you is responding, then think of Naomi, who had wandered away from truth, but was led back, redeemed and restored in ways she neither deserved nor imagined.

Or of Ruth, a vulnerable female foreign outsider who saw something powerful in her grieving mother-in-law and followed her, finding this faith for herself and so was also redeemed and restored beyond measure.

That's who this Christ is, who we believe in here at this church. That's the redeemer who called me many years ago. And like Naomi, I responded slowly, wounded and broken by a dream that had died.

His aftermath can still be felt at times, but my redeemer has breathed life and hope and love into me again. Renewing and sustaining me in ways that I could never have imagined. And that's the story of so many of us here.

So many of us here. If something in you is responding to this story, Christ in Ruth and the deep desire for redemption, then speak to somebody after the service. Listen to their redemption story or come forward for prayer at the end.

Whatever you do, respond. And then start the relationship that he's longing to have with you. The redemption he has planned for you.

Let's just finish in prayer. Father, we are so thankful that you love us so much, that you did the one thing that could reconcile us to you once more. You sent your son Jesus.

We are thankful for you, Lord Jesus. Please, Lord, we humbly ask you to whisper to the ones here today who don't know you and are empty and broken and need your redemption.

Speak to them today, stay with them today, and prompt them today to turn towards you, to hear your call and respond. And for those of us who know you as our redeemer, let us be an encouragement, Lord, to those, these ones who are calling.

Let us discern from you what you have done, what you have for us to do or say, and give us courage to be obedient. In Jesus' precious name, we ask these things. Amen.