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The God of Famine and Funeral

[This is an imperfect transcript from a pre-recorded sermon. Our volunteers work hard, but we appreciate your grace.]

Ruth 1:1-5 *1 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 the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. 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 These 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 Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.*

Greetings Hope Church! Good to be with you through this technology. This morning we are beginning a new series on the book of Ruth. We're calling it **Behold the Redeemer**, which is a phrase used in the book of Ruth, which describes so beautifully God's providential care, as he ministers to his people. And ultimately, this short, little, four chapter book points us to the person and arguably even the work of Jesus Christ. I'm going to pray for us in a minute and we're going to jump in. I just want to remind you that, after what we've done for numerous years now, we paused during the summer and we do a topical series to help us think about rightly being the church or being Christians or being on mission this year. We wrestled with this relational disciple making as a way of life. We're not just making disciples in these kinds of programmed events. We are making disciples in our lives and every nook and cranny and in every relationship, the deep committed ones, the ones as parents or grandparents to even neighbors and co-workers. And I'm hoping you're encouraged by that and even motivated by the spirit of God to minister in those ways. But now, we do what we've normally done - probably 85% of our sermons, our weekly gatherings, are expository messages. A word that means just drawing out from the text what God has written for us to hear and to respond to.

Let me pray and we'll jump into the first few verses of Ruth.

Father, minister to us this morning. Thank you that your Spirit wrote these words through your servants. Help us to hear this old testament book of Ruth and to be formed and changed. We pray Father - even as I entitled the first five verses of chapter one, that it describes you as the God of both famine and funeral - help us to see that this morning and learn and grow. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

I'm going to start with a brief introduction to the book of Ruth, just to give some orientation. We often do this in the first sermon of a new book series. While some Biblical books cover the whole world, like Genesis covering everything in creation, other biblical books and many of them

focus on an entire people group like the entire nation of Israel or all of the church in God's kingdom. But this book shares and hones in on the events of one family. Just a few people. In fact, there's really just three main characters: Boaz, Naomi, and, as the book is entitled, Ruth. That reminds us of something, even just that narrowing teaches us something, that God cares about every single family. He cares about every single person at all times. God speaks to all of us in all of the comprehensive ways that he does, and other moments he just hones in on one individual person or one individual family. That is, this is not just a God of the Bible. This is our God.

This book also shows, with the title of the book named after a person who is not even a Jew, an Israelite, she is actually a Moabitess. It shows that God is concerned with every nation. God is concerned with the alien and the stranger. God was not just concerned with the nation of Israel, as the rest of the Bible shows. God has always been concerned with all of creation, from people of every nation, as Revelation 5 describes so beautifully. It is not just the Israelites that gather around the throne at the end of time. It is people of every language and every tribe and every nation. Each people group are represented as the children of God, the Father made known through Jesus Christ. The context of the book of Ruth that's right after the book of Judges, not only in its canonical order, but also in its historical timeline around the time of the Judges. As verse 1 says "in the days when the judges ruled" - such language is giving us a clue of the context. If you remember your Biblical history, the time of the Judges was chaos. There was disobedience, there was rebellion. The people of God had chosen not to submit themselves to God their ruler, but they wanted to rule themselves. Hence the plural word "judges" - different rulers were battling for power and not submitting to the Lordship of God. So the book of Ruth, in a sense, is asking a question: what about the covenant promise God made to his people? Where is God in this time after the exodus? God had made a covenant with his people, but God's people struggled to be set apart among the nations and the cultures in which they lived. They did not live set-apart; they adopted the values and the practices and the principles of their day.

Brothers and sisters, we are so tempted to do the same thing. It is so hard for us to think *kingdom first*, rather than of ourselves as simply American citizens, let alone the western American cultural practices that are so dominant, that catechize us from when we are little children to grown adults. It is hard to think *kingdom first*. So if we can struggle with that, just imagine without God's full revelatory work, without the full awareness of Jesus Christ and his work, without the indwelling Spirit in their lives personally. Now we have that. We have that now in the new covenant. Just imagine in the Old Testament, under the old covenant, how hard it was for God's people to submit to him. You will see that. So the book of Ruth is asking, "Would God's people be faithful to God?" It's also asking, "How would God be faithful to his people?" Let me give you the gist of it. The answer is: it's not just God who will be faithful or even his people who will be faithful. The answer Ruth gives is both: God would raise up a redeemer from among his people. There's this theme in Ruth. There's this blossoming in Ruth that we're going to watch; God would raise up a redeemer from among his people. It is the great grandson of Ruth. It's King David, and it was King David from whom Jesus himself descended. Meaning, this little

glimpse into this one little family is actually showing a genealogy and a trajectory that ultimately manifests itself in the person and the work of Jesus Christ. Because if you were to flip your Bibles to Matthew chapter 1, guess whose name you would see in that opening genealogy? It would be Ruth. She is there. So God would be faithful to his people by raising up from among his own, and ultimately we know that that one faithful human being, that faithful Israelite from among all the people, the faithful son of the first Adam, was Jesus Christ. The second Adam, who would redeem all of creation, not just those in Israel, but also all the gentiles and all the world.

Let me give you, before we look at verses 1-5 together, let me give you some major themes that you're going to notice in the book of Ruth. I want you to have kind of these spectacles on to look for these things. There's four of them.

One is this: you will see the book teach us about the providence of God again. Providence is referring to the fact that the God who created the world also sustains the world. The same powerful God that made all things out of nothing can sustain all things to perfection to our greatest good and ultimately to his greatest glory. So you'll see in this the providence of God. And you'll see a family, and individuals, trusting God in the midst of suffering and loss. We'll see that even in our verses today.

A second theme we'll see is the character of God; that God has these big plans and yet has loving detail in our lives and in the lives of others. You'll watch the character of God. Even some of the ways that you'll see God make expectations on his people to deal with others, to care for others, reflects the nature of God's dealing and caring for us.

A third theme you'll see in the book of Ruth is a love of neighbor. This one will be an interesting one, especially in our political climate today. Because one of the main themes you will see is that God expects his people to be loving of neighbor, especially, get this, especially the outsider and even the foreigner. That's right. It's a loaded word to say in our context, but you will see God's people being called to be loving to the immigrant. Again, loaded. The moment I say that, all these thoughts of the political conversations today, and rightly so, differences of opinions of these jagged, not straight line but jagged line issues (regarding how we think about immigration, and, what's that look like in an American democracy, with a sovereign state like the U.S. or any other country), how do you think about these things? Fair enough, those are tough questions, but at the least you will be pressured to see that God expects us to love our neighbor, specifically the outsider and the foreigner.

The last theme you'll see in the book of Ruth, one of the major four, is you'll see the nature and responsibility of the family. You will see a love and a care for the family. That there is a bond, a ministry circle, one of the ministry circles that you've been placed in, that you and I are to be

responsible to. And you will see faithfulness within the family reflected through the book of Ruth.

So those are those four themes: the providence of God; the character of God; a love of neighbor, especially the outsider and the foreigner; and the nature and responsibilities of the family. That's my summarizing for you, four major themes that we're going to see throughout the book of Ruth.

Well now, let's turn in our last few minutes this morning to verses 1-5. They were read for you already. These verses are the preface, or the introduction, to the book. If you've ever opened a new book, there might be an introductory chapter or a couple pages, or some kind of preface orienting you to what's going on. Something that lists the major characters, explains the context, even kind of gives an idea of what the plot of the story or the book is. Those are the verses we're looking at today. They are the preface or the introduction to the book of Ruth. They explain when this is happening, where this is happening, and who it involves. Specifically, it involves a family in crisis.

So I'm just going to reflect on the five verses that were read for us already. I'm going to reflect on the four things worth noting in these opening verses, as we do well to listen to the context and the introduction that Ruth wants to give us today.

The first is this: that there was a major family crisis immediately in verse 1. We are told that there is a famine in the land, and that a man of Bethlehem, in Judah, went to sojourn in the country of Moab. He and his wife and his two sons - immediately you're getting information about when, where, and who. It was a major crisis - he was leaving for another land. Now think about this for a minute. What would force you to move to another land when you are in Israelite? That is a major move. Not as simple as maybe my family moving from Illinois to California, or vice versa. What we did six years ago was moved from California, and I haven't actually left my country. I've just moved within it. But even if I were to move to England, for example, or to the Philippines, for example, it's still different for me. The church of God is in all these places, and I can unite myself to his kingdom embassies in any country to which I go. It's different from me than it is for an Israelite, where there is only one temple in the world. There's only one place. That's in Jerusalem, and Bethlehem is this suburb of Jerusalem, and he's leaving that place not just for another part of Israel, but for another country. To be honest with you, he's not just leaving the land he knows, arguably, he's leaving his faith. The text wants us to see that he is leaving his own faith. Immediately we're asked a question, and maybe some of you in this crisis face this now, the pandemic in which we are in: How do you respond when things go bad? How do you trust in God when crisis hits? Maybe we should respect the difficulty that this man and his family faced. It's not just a small difficulty, like he was frustrated with certain civil expectations, etc. There was a question: was there even food? Could he feed his family? Where is God? How does he respond? I heard even just yesterday of a brother in our church being laid

off. I can only imagine that he and his family right now, in our own communities, in light of the pandemic, is facing that question: God, where are you? How will you care for me and my family? How can I trust you when I feel like the ground beneath me is crumbling? So we at least need to feel that in those moments of crisis, where will we put our trust in our faith?

A second thing to note in the text, and in your notes I have this underlined, the key words are the names in this passage - they tell their own story. For example, what is ironic is that the town of Bethlehem literally means "land of bread" or "house of bread" - a famine in the house of bread. Arguably, Bethlehem was known historically to have great grain harvests, so this famine struck to the core of a place that was historically well fed, because of fertile soil or crops that would be blessed by God. It is completely a famine. Sometimes the authors put the names in because they want us to see a little bit behind the curtain. This famine was so deep that even the land of bread was struck by it. Another one that's interesting, the name of the man in verse two is Elimelech . The word "eli" literally means "my God" and the last part of the name "melech" is from the hebrew word "king." So do you know what Elimelech 's name means? My God is King. And yet he leaves, he walks away. He goes to a foreign land with foreign gods, with no temple of his God. Does Elimelech believe that God is actually King? At least not by his actions. Here's another - the name of Elimelech 's wife, Naomi, means "pleasant" or "delightful." Life is good. Life is full. But quickly her life changes. In fact, skipping ahead, what we'll look at in a couple weeks, if you jump down to verse 20, Naomi is aware of what her name means and even wants herself to be called by another name. She says, call me Mara, that is bitter, because God has been harsh toward me. Notice, even the characters are aware of what their names signify. What's interesting in the story is Elimelech and Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, they moved to Moab and they remained there. Then verse 3 says Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took two Moabite women, two wives. The name of one was Orpah and the name of the other was Ruth. They lived there about 10 years and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. Do you know what the name Mahlon means? It means sickly. You know what the name Chilion means? It means failing. It's almost as if these two young men were named after their eventual fates. Also, and lastly, we get the name of their two wives: Orpah and Ruth. We don't know what those names mean, because they are Moabite names, which means they are not names normally given to God's people. In fact, we know this about the culture: Moabite people were forbidden to worship in the temple of God, because they worshipped a foreign God. They were, in a sense, outsiders. In that same way we might say in the new covenant that the Lord's table is reserved for God's people, and that there's judgment against those who partake, because you aren't invited because you're hungry or because you want to socialize at the Lord's table. You're invited because you are a member of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament had similar boundaries - exclusivity through God himself. The names tell a story. The story explains, as we saw a couple minutes ago, that there was death and vulnerability.

That'd be a third thing I'd want to point out this morning. The story explains the plot and it talks about death and the vulnerability that we have as humans. Naomi lost her husband and her two

sons. Now, think about that with me for a minute: she lost her husband and her two sons. You might just be thinking about that at an emotional level, but I want you to think about this in the ancient world. In the ancient world, this loss involves more than a relationship. It also means the loss of financial resources. It also means a loss of property ownership; a woman had no right to own a house or property if her husband died and there were no sons. That property would go to a different man in the family, and it would be based on that man's generosity, whether the woman, the wife, the daughters, the children, would actually have a home. If that other male family member was not generous, the wife and the children had no home. Naomi has no male figure in whom she can rely, no home, no wealth. Her livelihood is dependent on somebody else. She has no right to own property. She has no right to work a job. This is a very different culture than the egalitarian culture in which we now live. Feel the crisis. J.I. Packer talks about this understanding of crisis with God. How do we let God enter into that? Remember that question we asked earlier. Is God going to be faithful? How do we respond when circumstances go bad? J.I. packer spoke about this. I bring him up because in just the last few days, our dear saintly brother, J.I. packer passed away, and went home to be with the Lord. If you haven't read some of his books, specifically *Knowing God*, you should. He says that there is something we've forgotten in a recent interview. I listened to that, now it's 20 years old, and he says one of the things that we've forgotten is that, in this life, we will have suffering. Christians should expect not to have it easy because they won't, they should expect *not* to have it easy. Jesus suffered. The apostles suffered persecution, personal hostility, conflict and strife. Even in the churches, among Christians, these things existed. J.I. Packer says this: We must expect suffering and budget for it, just like we would budget for massive car repair or braces for your kids or retirement, you budget for suffering. But modern Christians, we don't. One of our values in this culture is comfort and ease of life. That almost becomes a religious value. If you think about it and when suffering comes, modern Christians think something has gone wrong. Maybe God is weak or God has forgotten me, but suffering and pain are par for the Christian life.

This leads us to the last thing I want to say to you this morning, not only the fact that there is death and vulnerability in this world, as this text shows, but also that God is both sovereign and mysterious. At the same time that Elimelech is abandoning God, at the same time that he is facing the reality of death, his name still says the truth - God is my king. We have so domesticated God that we demand he conform to our ways, our wills, and our wishes. God, brothers and sisters, is both sovereign and mysterious. He is both of those. God is mysterious, which means that sometimes the "why" question will not be answered. In fact, you could even say that most often the why question is itself self-seeking, with our modern habit of shrinking God down to almost human proportions. We expect to see the reason for what God has done in the short term, the reasons for what God is doing for everything, and then we feel there is something wrong if we don't know. Why did this happen to me? Why does someone close to me have this illness, or face this financial ruin? God answer my questions. Well, God is sovereign over those things, but he is also mysterious. That would encourage us, especially in light of this pandemic that we are facing now, with all the crises, to not only hold to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, but also hold to the doctrine that he is mysterious. I think we could maybe say two things about the fact that God is both sovereign and mysterious. One would be this: God knows

what he is doing, even if he doesn't always tell us. The fact that he is sovereign and mysterious means that he can know what he's doing, even if he doesn't always tell us. In fact, to be honest with you, it's often none of our business, above our pay grade.

Another truth to note - and I think this is helpful for us to hear in this season - is that God's reason is often to be found in the future, not in the past. Sometimes it might be way down the road, decades later, that we see exactly what God was doing. It will only be in the full expression of the life of Jesus Christ that we see the crisis facing this one family, Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, and Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth, that we will see that out of that crisis came three generations later a young man named David. And out of that family line, several generations later, came a boy born to a virgin named Jesus Christ. In whom we now have life, because God is King.

God is the God of famine and funeral. He is sovereign and yet mysterious, and we do well to listen carefully to how he describes those things in this book. So what will Naomi do? How about Orpah? And daughter-in-law, Ruth? What were they? What would they do now? What would their response be? We'll find that out as the text moves on. What will you do in your crisis as you try to trust in God, even in those moments of famine and funeral? Oh, Christian, look and see the God of the Bible! Don't domesticate Him. Look and see the God of the Bible, the God who reigns over famines and funerals, and trust in him. God is your King.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for your word, for the gospel of Jesus Christ, for the book of Ruth and the way that it ministers to us. Help us, Father, to grow this week. From these words, help us to, as we travel through this book of Ruth, not only see its story, the story of a family, but see the God who is behind all things, who is providential and sovereign, even if still mysterious. Father, help us not to domesticate you, as, if you are one of us, but to resign and submit ourselves to our King and Lord, you, our King. Father bless us as we go from this place. I pray in Jesus's name, amen.