

Returning Empty

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Preacher: Angus Macleod

[0 : 00] Well, it is good to be with you, and it is good that Ali chose a nice happy passage for us to look at in the new year, as you may have gathered as we read it. But I'm actually really glad that we're looking at the book of Ruth.

We're going to be looking at the book of Ruth for the next four weeks. It is going to get much happier. But I really like the book of Ruth because in the grand scheme of the Bible, where you're going through and you start the beginning of creation all the way till Jesus returns, here in Ruth, we slow right down.

We go from kings and armies and now we're just here looking at one family. One family as they go through some traumatic, awful, just quite normal things in a broken world.

And we get to see the reality of them fighting to trust in God, to hold on to the fact that he is good. But what we get to see is that in the midst of these dark days, in the midst of the darkest days, that God has a plan and God is going to work out his plan.

We get to join in and see the feelings and the emptiness and the bitterness of Naomi as she wrestles with this. She wrestles with, is God against me?

[1 : 21] Does God have a plan for the world and his people and for me? And I think for all of us, I hope that this series will be useful as we look out on a world, an uncertain world, as we face this new year.

As we look to see where God is in the midst of the darkness, in the midst of this world that seems so uncertain. And as you look out on your own life, as you go through your daily struggles, as you try and keep your...

Your January plans of reading, of going to the gym or whatever else you've set up.

But it's also as you try and just go to work, look after your children. As you do the ordinary everyday things. When you feel that, where is God?

Has he abandoned you? Has he forgotten about you? And as we heard earlier, does he not know your suffering? But this book throughout, it screams that God does care.

[2 : 29] God does have a plan. And God will use the ordinary everyday things in life to bring about and to reveal his plan for the world. To bring about the reign of his king.

It shows that God does care for his world. God does care for his people. And he's going to show his love through individuals.

Bringing them back to himself. And revealing his goodness to them. But, to get into the book of Ruth, I want us to turn to the last page.

So that is, if you haven't closed your Bibles, that's on page 224. And partly to steal Ali's thunder in a couple of weeks' time. But also just because you probably have heard we are back in the town of Bethlehem.

And Christmas isn't that far past. I'm sure you have a little town of Bethlehem still ringing in your ears. But we get to see that there's another son born.

[3 : 30] Another baby born in Bethlehem. Many hundreds of years before Jesus. In chapter 4 and in verse 21, we see that...

Sorry, in verse 17. We are told the son is born.

Naomi receives a grandson. And we are given a family tree. Which shows that this son will be the grandfather of King David.

And in the first book you come to in the New Testament, what you find is the book of Matthew. That opens with a big, long genealogy. It goes all the way from Abraham, all the way to Jesus.

And it takes this wee little detour to mention Ruth. Naomi's daughter-in-law. And this son who was born here.

[4 : 37] And as we get to see that in the midst of this seemingly small town. And these dark days. God really does have a plan. They are going to be the grandmother.

And the great grandmother and the grandmother of King David. But that's the end of the book. Before we get there. And before Ali gets to give you a happier note. We get to see what is the problem.

We get to see the sadness. If you turn back to me to chapter 1. In the beginning. We see in chapter 1 and verse 1. In the days when the judges ruled.

There was a famine in the land. You see there's a series of problems. There's a famine. And this is in the land. In the promised land that God had given to his people.

We're not that far from where the people have been delivered from slavery in Egypt. Brought through the Red Sea. Through the wilderness. And given this land of promise. A land that was said to be plentiful.

[5 : 42] And would feed them. Where God would be with them. And bless them. But here there's famine in this land. Something's gone wrong.

We're also told that it's in the time of the judges. And there's a whole book in the Bible called Judges. That comes just before Ruth. And there. We read that there's a problem.

Because there's no king. And if you want. You can turn back just the page before. Actually very helpfully. And at the very bottom of the page it says. In verse 25. In those days there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in their eyes. And it's a book filled with sadness. Because everyone does what they think to be right. It's a book that longs for a king.

It longs for a king to deliver the people. And bring lasting rest. And they go through cycles of suffering and pain. And God raises up someone and delivers them.

[6 : 42] And once again they forget. And this cycle goes on. And it's one of the saddest books I think in the Bible. There's a deep longing for rest in the midst of suffering.

For this lasting peace to come. But it also shows that in the waiting for this. God raises up people to help. And to deliver his people. Even in the darkest of days.

God has a plan. So we're going to be looking at this chapter. We're going to look at it in three cheery January headings. Of leaving hungry.

Looking in the first five verses. Returning bitter in the verses 6 to 18. And then arriving empty in verses 19 to 22. And we're beginning with leaving hungry.

And look with me at verse 1. And we see in the day when the judges ruled. There was famine in the land. And a man of Bethlehem and Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab. He and his wife and his two sons.

[7 : 41] And we're introduced to this man. A man of Bethlehem. In the region of Judah. And in this book we need some help. Because it's some 3,000 years ago.

And we are a bit distant from that now. There's things in this book that would jump off the page to the person who read them at the beginning.

Just like in the days of the judges. But as we go through this book we need to listen out for people's names. And places in this chapter. And look for repetition.

What we do see is in Bethlehem there's a famine. And this is interesting because Bethlehem literally means house of bread.

But there's no bread in this house of bread. There's no food. Bit of irony. And it highlights the sadness. But this famine is so severe that this man leaves his hometown and his country to go as a refugee to the land of Moab.

[8 : 47] And Moab itself is a land that is filled with history in the bits of the Old Testament that come before it. And then in the book of Judges. The Moabites are enemies of the people of Israel.

They've cursed them. They tempt them to follow their God. And that God allowed for child sacrifices. They'd invaded them and oppressed them in the book of Judges.

But this journey is to fix a practical need. It's a sensible solution to a problem. They're hungry. But in the Bible story this isn't a good solution.

Even to famine. They're leaving the promised land. They're leaving the place that God promised to be with his people. To a land that is hostile to them. This shows even more.

This sadness. And I can't imagine famine. But here it is. And it's real in our world today. But this is sad.

[9 : 51] And we're told a second time the same thing in verse 2. That they go to Moab. To highlight it. Elimelech. His wife Naomi and his two sons all leave. But we also see that they're no longer just exiles or sojourners.

We are told that they remain in Moab. And later we see that over 10 years passes. It's not just a passing. This is somewhere they go and stay.

They left hungry. But they choose to remain and make it a home. Also an aside. Elimelech himself.

His name means God is king. And in this longing for a king. We see even in his name. That God had promised to be their king.

But this tale takes a further downward spiral in verse 3. Elimelech himself. Naomi's husband dies.

[10 : 48] And leaves her with two sons. It's terrible. And these two sons soon take wives from the people of Moab. And again this is a flag.

The people of God were warned about this. And this isn't wise. To take a wife of another nation. Because they were said that they could lead them away. But what we don't find that comes next is.

There's no children that come. And then in verse 5. These two sons also die. So in these five verses. There's been three funerals.

It's tragic. And for the life of Naomi. She's left with her husband. And her sons. And no grandchildren. And a day. Where for a woman. Without having any men in her family.

For security. And provision. Is devastating. For the reader. This is culturally disastrous. She's left in a foreign land. Without provision.

[11 : 47] And an heir for a family name. It's supposed to make us feel like this way. It's supposed to make us feel. That this isn't right.

We're longing that God would come. And help us. But it also asks the question. Of us. Where do we turn. In our hunger. In our need.

To see our needs met. Do we see God. And his provision. Or do we try and find. A wise solution. On our own. See Naomi's husband.

Sought refuge. Away from God's presence. And his community. And his people. And likewise. We too. In times of trial. We isolate ourselves. Or try and figure things out. We leave his people.

And his word. And his promises. And we can be tempted to. We have trouble in our lives. And we skip church. We skip our bible.

[12 : 44] And we have things. That we need to do. But even here. Our heavenly father. Always provides a way. For return. For all his children.

Who have wandered away. We come to our second point. The returning bitter. We see this. In verses 6 to 18. When we next meet Naomi. She's settled in Moab.

Working in the fields. With her two daughters-in-law. And she hears news. So much so. We're told. It makes her a rose. She stands up.

We're told. In verse 6. For she heard. In the fields of Moab. That the Lord. Had visited his people. And given them food. Hearing this leads her. To get up.

With her daughters-in-law. To return. From the country of Moab. And what we hear. Is this woman. Returns.

[13 : 41] And this word. Return. Is going to come up. Twelve times. In this little section. It's going to be key. It's almost in every single verse. And this word. Is the Hebrew word.

For repentance. It means just to turn around. To turn away. From walking. Away from God. To face him. And walk towards him. Return.

But this repetition. Is not accidental. Verse 6. Also speaks of the Lord. All capitals. This is the covenant name. Of the Lord. This is God's name. Yahweh.

And God has visited his people. And God is not absent. Or unaware. But active. And at work. Caring for his people. He visits them.

And he gives them food. And the famine ends. See God's promise. Was to be with his people. In the land. And to give them. And provide for them.

[14 : 39] And this news. Comes to Naomi. And she still. Is far off. But she. She has hope. She doesn't believe yet. That God is for her. But she hears.

That God is blessing his people. And she knows. That she just wants. To get back there. And this journey. Was difficult. To get to Moab. It's even more difficult.

On the way back. It's made worse. By what she believes. Awaits her. And her daughters-in-law. When she gets there. And she doesn't want. Her daughters-in-law.

To endure this. She wants them. To go back home. To their parents. We see. Her care for them. In verse 8. And we see.

But Naomi said. To her two daughters-in-law. Go. Return. Each of you. To her mother's house. May the Lord. Deal kindly with you. As he has dealt. With the dead. And with me. The Lord grant.

[15 : 33] That you may find rest. Each of you. In the house. Of her husband. And she kissed them. And they lifted up. Their voices. And wept. So she wants. This God.

This covenant God. Who's caring. For his people. In Israel. To be kind. To these widows. Just as they have been. Kind to her. And she speaks. A blessing.

Over them. Wanting the Lord. To give them rest. In marriage. And a house. And a husband. To hopes. That they would find security. And they weep together.

These two daughters-in-law. Want to go with her though. To be with her people. But Naomi. Desperately. Tries to discourage them. And in verse 11. She tells them.

Of this hopeless situation. That awaits them. She says. Turn back my daughters. Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb. That you may become. Your husbands. Turn back my daughters.

[16 : 28] 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. Would you therefore. Wait till we were.

Wait till we were. They were grown. Would you therefore. Refrain from marrying. Naomi is saying. It's hopeless to go with her. She cannot provide.

The son for them to marry. She says. She is too old. And even if she could. It'd be too long. And these women.

Are unlikely. To get husbands. In Bethlehem. And we see. The cost of the return. For them. She says. Would you refrain. From marrying. See going with Naomi.

Means a life. Of what potentially. A hopeless existence. Without a husband. Without protection. Without care. And she goes on to say.

[17 : 23] No my daughters. It is exceedingly bitter. To me. For your sake. That the hand of the Lord. Has gone out. Against me. Apologies.

But Naomi is filled with bitterness. In her situation. She believes. She believes. That God is against her. And this is now affecting. Her daughters-in-law. She believes.

That God is against her. In verse 14. We see that. Orpha. Embraces her mother-in-law. And goes home. But Ruth will not go. She clings.

She's not put off. By this emptiness. Or the hopelessness. That her mother-in-law promises. Look at me. In verse 15. Where Naomi again tries. And helps us.

Helps us to see. That this. Isn't just about a postcode. Or husband. But people. And gods. In verse 15. We see. And she said. See your sister-in-law. Has gone back.

[18 : 20] To her people. And to her gods. Return. After your sister-in-law. Or for her return. She has gone back. To Moab. To her family. This is to return.

To her family. And their gods. Why don't you return. Ruth. You're likely. To receive provision. And hope there. Yet.

This is not. What Ruth wants. We see in verse 16. Where Ruth says to her. Do not urge me. To leave you. Or to return. From following you. Or for it. I will go. Where you go. I will go.

And where you lodge. I will lodge. Your people. Will be my people. And your God. My God. Where you die. I will die. And there. I will be buried. May the Lord. Do to me. And more so. Anything but death.

Parts me from you. See Ruth makes a vow. And this is the sort of vow. That God makes. It's his language. It's covenant language. Where I die.

[19 : 17] Where you die. I will die. She wants. And permanently. Wants to remain. With Naomi. And her people. She wants to stick close. To Naomi.

And she says. Your people. Will be my people. She's identifying. With God's people. And most importantly. She says. Your God. Is my God.

She calls him. By God's name. The Lord. She asks God. To stamp this. And says. May the Lord. Do to me. And more so. Anything. But death. Parts me from you. We will see.

That this is only. The beginning. Of the faithfulness. We'll see of Ruth. In this book. This is a vow. Of one of God's people. She rejects.

The gods. Of her family. And she's. Calling on God. To provide for her. She's trusting. In God. And this is the vow. Of her heart. That demonstrates.

[20 : 12] Her character. And Naomi's. Left without words. She runs out of ways. To convince her. To abandon her.

Like she feels. Everyone else has. And we get to see. That Naomi's view. Is that. God gives us. What we deserve. And she deserves.

This bitterness. But that's not. What we see. In the Bible. That's not what we get. Revealed by God. What we see. Is that God. Repeatedly.

And constantly. Gives his people. What they do not deserve. Called grace. Naomi's only expecting. To receive bitterness.

And loss. But what is surprising. In this book. The picture of faith. And grace. Is an outsider. There's more by widow.

[21 : 07] She turns to God. Expectingly. She trusts in him. For provision. Naomi can't see it. But God is going to take away.

Her bitterness. God's going to fill. Her with fullness. God will provide rest for her. And he will do it. Through this daughter-in-law. From her.

The son will come. The son. Jesus. Who will provide her. And all God's people. With access to forgiveness. Who will take away bitterness. And sorrow.

Will mean that we can return. Not return bitter. But return expectantly. Because of what he will do. We all can come.

And find this acceptance. We can know that God is never against us. And we can find rest in him. See God is active. And does care. See Ruth.

[22 : 08] And Naomi cannot see it. But God is at work in her life. Making sure she is not alone. Making sure she is someone. Who is faithful with her. And we turn to our final point.

The arrival. They arrive. Empty. And after a long journey. They make it. At last. But the arrival. Into the small village. Causes quite the stir.

Even causes quite a scene. And even after over ten years. People recognize Naomi. As the woman who left with her family. All those years ago. We see it in verse 19.

So the two of them. Went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem. The whole town. Was gathered. And the woman said. Is this Naomi? And this is the way of a small town.

People know who you are. Before the ferry lands in Lewis. People know that I am on my way home. I don't know how. But someone behind me. Must know who I am.

[23 : 06] And there must be some group chat. For people who arrive. But that's the way it goes. And people rush. And they hear. And there's a stir. And new spreads.

But she's different. They ask. Is this the same Naomi? Is this Naomi that left here. All those years ago? She's taken a toll on her.

And in sadness and despair. Naomi responds. And answers the question. Of what she thinks happens to her. She says in verse 20. Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara.

For the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. She asks them. Why do you call Naomi? Again. This name is important. Naomi means pleasant. She feels that her own name even mocks her.

She does not feel pleasant. She feels only bitter. She says call me Mara. Which means bitter. And in verse 21. She says who she thinks done this to her.

[24 : 08] 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. Why do you call me pleasant.

When I left this village all these years ago. I had a husband. And sons. And hope. Now I'm here empty. She believes God's done this to her.

He's testified against her. He's against her. But if you were here. I think it was helpful that we went through the book of Job last year. Where we saw similar suffering and bitterness and accusations against God.

So all she can say is. This has happened to me. God must be against me. As we saw in Job.

This sadness and loss doesn't mean that God is against you. But for many people. And for Job's friends. And for us sometimes. We believe that good things only happen to good people.

[25 : 13] If tragedy comes. God must be against you. And grief can blind us. And cause bitterness to set in. We forget who God is.

We can spend so long looking at what has happened. We cannot see what he is doing. It can fill up with this sadness. And emptiness. And bitterness that wells up inside us.

It keeps us from God. Because we believe that God is the one who's done it. God is against me. How can I go to him? We're not told if Naomi's leaving is right or wrong.

That's left for our own thoughts. But the point of this whole chapter is that she came back. Her hope was raised that God was there.

Even with her bitter view of God. She knew and she hoped. That maybe just maybe. God could and would help her. And the last two verses.

[26 : 19] Show us some sign of hope. That God is at work in this dark circumstances. What we don't find is Naomi rejoicing in the fact that she has this faithful daughter-in-law.

This in verse 22 we see. So Naomi returned. And Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her. And who returned from the country of Moab.

Naomi's pity blinds her to this. She tells everyone I'm alone. I have no one. I have nothing. And you think that Ruth is just standing there and saying. Well what about me?

I'm here. I love you. We get more hope at the close in verse 22. We are told for a second time. They arrive at Bethlehem.

But this time it's added. That they're there in the barley harvest. See the house of bread. Has food. And this chapter will not answer all our questions.

[27 : 16] Their home and their food. But we're left wondering. Will these two widows find the rest that we all seek? Not just for their stomachs. But for their hearts.

Will Naomi find this fullness that will satisfy her emptiness? Will she see that God's hand isn't against us? It has and always will be for her.

Will she come to see the Lord's provision that has been with her. All through these dark days. With his daughter-in-law who is faithful.

Like God himself. Naomi's loss will remain. Even though she's returned. It still looks. And it still feels bad. And not everything will be fixed.

But God is at work to fill her emptiness with joy. And that's what we'll see when we come to chapter 4. We'll see a joy that returns.

[28 : 15] A joy in God and who he is. But for all of us. We are called to come and return to God.

God promises to meet us with blessing. So no matter how far we wander. How weak we feel. How bitter our hearts may come.

We can know that God is outstretched with his hands. With blessing. And when he doesn't get her theology right. And everything put into lines.

She just hears that God is over there. And I must be there. She comes anyway. Even though she has doubts.

And questions. God still gives. Not even her skepticism. And her doubt. And her worry.

[29 : 18] And her fear. Can separate her. From God's lavish love upon her. In Jesus. And it won't separate us either. We don't have to be afraid.

What is coming this year. Or returning to him. We can find our rest. In God. No matter how far we've wandered.

No matter if you've never come to him before. Or you've come back to him every new year. And you say. This will be the year where I'm faithful. And this is the parable of the prodigal son.

This is what Jesus tells them. What God is like. The one who is far off. This prodigal son. Has left his father.

Has wandered off. Thought it'll be far better over there. But ends up in a mess. Some thought comes to me. Things. Well even my servants.

[30 : 17] In my father's house. Receive scraps from his table. Maybe if I just go back there. And just. Say just God. Will you just. Take even me. A little bit. Will you God. Just give me something.

And he gets his speech ready. And he's like. I'm going to say this. And I'm going to say that. And I'm going to. I say God. Well just. Take me back. Please. Help me. Before he even gets there.

This father runs to him. Hugs him. Kisses him. Embraces him. Throws a robe around his shoulders. Puts a ring on his hand. Kills a fatted calf.

And causes a feast. And he says. My son was dead. But is now alive. He's returned. And this is the welcome.

That's promised. To all of us. To everyone. To the people. Out in the streets. Of Haddington. There's a God. Who loves us. Who accepts us.

[31 : 13] And who calls us. To come home. And in Jesus. He's lived in this world. He's felt your suffering. He's taken your pain.

He knows what loss is. He weeps at death. At all the broken things. That go on in the lives. Of all of us. He knows your suffering. He knows the suffering.

Of Ruth. And Naomi. And he came. And gave his life. To bring healing. Into that darkness. And that.

Healing will come. He will come back. For all of us. Until then. We need to remind each other. That there is hope. In the darkness. There is life.

Offered. And there is fullness. To be received. Even in the midst. Of our suffering. Let's turn and pray. And ask God. For his help. Lord.

[32 : 11] As we look out. In this year. We ask. That you'd be near us. That you'd be close to us. That you would hold us fast. Even as we try. And run. From your arms.

As we feel shame. As we feel weakness. As we feel loss. Would we turn to you. And know that you satisfy. Our deepest longings.

And our hurts. Lord. We ask that you'd be here. With every heart. We ask that you would help us. To bring your comfort. And your peace. To everyone in this town. For we do not have good news.

For only the happy. But we have good news. For everyone. Whoever they are. Whatever they're going through. There is a God. Who cares. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.