

- Today we begin a nine-week journey through the Book of Ruth!
- And there are three reasons why we, as a leadership team, felt that this book would be important for us right now in this season
  - **First**, we want you to see how the Old Testament is a vital part of our growth and formation. All scripture is breathed by God.
  - **Second**, there are very strong community lessons in this book. And we are in a season where we are actively seeking to strengthen and grow our Reality Ventura Community Groups as one of the primary ways you can grow in this church and how we all play a huge role in each other's lives. We will be drip-feeding in important community lessons through this book as we begin to ask for and train up new CG Leaders in the hope of launching even more CGs this year.
  - **And the third** and most important reason this book is important is that the Old Testament leads us to Jesus Christ.
- And the way this happens is through the themes of Hope and redemption. What is our hope? And what does Hope look like as a way of life? Lets' begin this journey by reading Ruth 1:1-5 (NIV)

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. <sup>2</sup>The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

<sup>3</sup> Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

- Imagine two women working on an assembly line. They have the same level of education, same background and even the same temperament! They both have the most monotonous, boring jobs: They put together the same few parts for a machine over and over again, all day long, 8 hours a day. The room they work in is way too hot, noisy and not well lit. Their circumstance is identical in every way. They work the same hours and get same number of breaks. Except one is frustrated and the other woman is absolutely thrilled
- The first woman is saying “I hate this, isn’t this terrible?” and the second woman is saying “I’m just fine, I’m thrilled!” **Why?**
- Because the first woman was told she is getting paid only \$20 *thousand* per year, and the other woman \$20 *million* per year.
- Same circumstances, even temperament, but how they experienced their jobs was radically shaped by their expectations of the future
- Now, the point is *not* that we all need a bigger paycheck. In fact, we should never put our hope in money. But the point, which all people regardless of faith understand, is this:
- **How we experience our circumstance in the *present* is radically shaped by what we believe about the *future*.**
- **We are hope-based creatures.** So, what is your hope? And is it strong enough to carry through your circumstances?
- Today we begin a story which is primarily about two women who in large part share the same circumstances. And yet they both start out experiencing them very differently. And the difference is hope.
- The Christian life does not promise that your circumstances will always be pleasant. Doesn't promise 20mil. In fact, were told that you will have trials and tribulations. But Christian faith does give you hope. A hope that enables you to face even the *worst* of circumstances in a way that does not *destroy* you but *transforms* you
- Today we begin a journey that will teach us about hope.
- And we start with the first woman whose journey begins with uncertainty but finishes with clarity, who faces unspeakable pain,

and yet finds incredible redemption, who sets out with deep despair, but arrives with remarkable joy whose story begins with death but ends in life. And the difference is hope.

- And I think we all desperately need this: This past year has been full of disappointment, hardship, loss and pain for many. (Myself)
- I am not going to promise you that you will be taken out of these circumstances. Or that you just need to chin up. I want you to see how God gives you remarkable hope *within* your circumstances.
- And along the way we will discover how this hope produces courage against the odds, kindness amid chaos, generosity in a time of scarcity, and faith in the midst of fear. Hope as a way of life.
- But today we do not begin with the woman the book is named after. The opening begins with Naomi, whose Hebrew name means *Pleasant one*, though her circumstances tempt her to become bitter
- Yet through all her struggles, her life helps another woman find hope! Through Naomi, another woman, Ruth, discovers her hope and healing in the bigger story of God. And their lives become our lesson, showing us how we can find hope in God's story and what happens in us and through us when we do.
  - How can we survive when we have no control, where the most important people have gone, and where God seems distant?
- Today we begin to learn about **hope as a way of life**... but it starts in the circumstance where most of us are tempted to give up. **Tragedy**. And what do we learn? 3 vital lessons. First, in your circumstances

### 1. Hardship Will Come

- a. This narrative (v 1) takes place in the chaotic time that Israel was ruled by Judges, around 1,000 BC. We know this from the historical book called by the same name. It is a time of social, moral and religious chaos, where the people of Israel did what was right in their own eyes.
- b. Add to this, it was a time of famine. And the situation was connected. God stated very clearly to the people of Israel that

- if they followed his ways, their land would be blessed, but if they turned, the land would suffer. They had and it did.
- c. But all those big picture problems are compressed into a few short sentences, causing us to focus us in on this one family.
  - d. Naomi and Elimelech are ready to leave Bethlehem and set out for Moab, but is this the right choice?
  - e. You could say no. The land of Moab was Israel's historic enemy. Going there was to go into the land of idol worship and human sacrifice! God's promise to Israel was connected to them remaining faithful in the place that he set them!
  - f. Elimelech makes his choice, the man whose name means "My God is king" leaves the land of the king.
  - g. But we can see their reason, of course. One the one hand he wants to provide for his family and sees a better opportunity elsewhere. But on the other hand, they were called to stay in the land, even when it was hard. Which raises a question
    - i. Will we follow God's command when it is inconvenient? Even difficult? Important questions to ask.
  - h. Sometimes however, the suffering comes even when you make the right decisions! With N and E, we aren't told explicitly
  - i. Of course, things went well, but only for a number of years.
  - j. Tragedy strikes not once, not twice, but 3 times. (v 3-5)
  - k. The order of events reveals how painful it was for Naomi...
  - l. As hard as the death of her husband would be, the hope that came with her sons was lost as they died shortly thereafter.
  - m. Naomi is now facing perhaps the worst fate a woman could face back then; personally, socially and practically
  - n. She is alone. It seems that there is no one to comfort her. She is without the help of her Israelite community and is actually in danger of losing her family heritage with all the men in the family dying. And she is not young anymore.

- o. Why all this detail? Well, it's not only important to the story, its important for us. I want you to see how the Bible acknowledges with remarkable honesty, the hardships of life.
- p. Friends, God acknowledges that the pain in *your* life, what *you* are going through and experiencing in your circumstances.
- q. Just as Naomi's suffering is noted, acknowledged and recorded, so are your trials and tribulations! God says, "I see you!"

**Psalm 56:8** "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book." NLT

- r. But, we ask, what will happen? Well, that is the 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson:

## **2. Humility is Required**

- a. Sometimes we are told the reason behind a particular person's death. But here, as in other cases, we are simply not told.
- b. Indeed, like with Naomi, there will be many times and events in our lives where we will face hardship, and will not be aware of the reasons for them. Their purpose is hidden. And we face what Naomi faces in verses 1-5... the unknown.
  - i. From her perspective, the odds are against her!
  - ii. Living in a foreign land with the possibility of ceasing to exist all together... no security... no identity
- c. She has lost everything. And she begins to see God as an enemy. Based on her circumstances alone, we are tempted to ask: Has God forsaken her? Has God lost control? Does he care
- d. Here we are introduced to what some call "the dark side of providence" ... that which we cannot see.
- e. And it is absolutely vital that we cultivate humility, acknowledging that though our present circumstance is real and may be painful, we will not always know the reasons why, there will be mystery (if you are like me... "God hates me!")
  - i. But I don't know how things will turn out!
- f. Friends, there are times where God's hand seems to be hidden!
- g. Knowing this does not make hardships easier, but it can be less debilitating! Knowing that our perspective is limited, knowing

that all the facts are not always going to be available to us, should at least give us some humility in our sorrow, perhaps even slow us down before jumping to conclusions!

- h. Hardships will come. We are given permission to honest about this. But humility is required, for our perspective is limited!
- i. But the lessons do not end here. We absolutely must remember what Ruth teaches. That if our faith is in God...

### **3. Hope Always Has the Last Word**

- a. For reasons that we will see by the end, Naomi goes from one describing herself as “bitter and empty” to one being described by others as blessed and restored! The story doesn't end here.
- b. For this story is a story of God’s sovereignty. Hidden, and at times deafeningly silent... God is at work... even in circumstances of grief and hardship (Tapestry analogy)
- c. We are given many, many reminders in Scripture of God’s work in this way. Joseph: Good. Bad. Worse. Redemption.

**Gen. 50:20** As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

- d. Little did Naomi know that it was only a matter of time before she would see the fulfillment of a promise God made to Israel... to bring about a redeemer for her and the world! And this saviour would come through her family line... a line she thought was broken. Hope has the last word. **The gospel**
- e. The son of God Jesus Christ sees our sufferings, enters the hardship that our sin created. A man of sorrows acquainted with grief! He experiences the worst of a sinful world.
- f. More than that, on the cross, he takes the punishment that our sinful world deserves! And rises again to give us victory! To give us new life! To give us forgiveness. To give us... hope.
- g. Naomi’s hope would ultimately be found in the same promise we find our hope: the promise of a savior, redeemer, Jesus.

- h. **Friends, Hardship will come.** We can be honest. I invite you to be honest today. But in your cry, remember this: The presence of hardship does not mean the absence of God.
- i. **Friends, Humility is required.** There will be times when God's hand appears to be hidden! And these seasons may go on for a long time. Possibly, without the miraculous, without the spectacular. For in Naomi's story, we don't see prophets, no kings rising up to save the people... it's all very ordinary. But just because you aren't seeing the miraculous, it does not mean that God is not at work. And don't disregard his power to work even the most ordinary circumstances for extraordinary purposes. In our honesty let us also cultivate humility.
  - i. Little did Naomi know that millions and millions of people would read her story... her great descendant would be Jesus, Messiah, and little did she know... that standing right next to her in her hour of sorrow was the woman God would use to bring about his plan! That's Ruth.
- j. **And friends** for anyone who trusts in Jesus: **Hope Always has the Last Word.** And this hope is not wishful thinking.
- k. Just like Naomi was eventually to find her hope in the promises of God's faithfulness, so we can do the same... but even more!
- l. God may not reveal the whole story about your circumstances, but he has given you promises within them. And he has given you a trustworthy track record of proof to rely upon. (Bible)
- m. Christian hope is not some vague expectation about a better future. It's based on Christ's work in the past!
- n. Jesus has come. He has died for sin. He has risen. This means everything he said about our future is true. And that means that my circumstances will not have the last word. Jesus has the last word. That's what gives me hope even in the midst of the harsh circumstances of loss. And even when I breath my last, He will raise me up to eternal life, fully alive!

- o. This is why the great evangelist from the 1800s D.L. Moody wrote of his own death *"Someday you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody of East Northfield, is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I will be more alive than I am now."*
- p. **Trust in Him today.** If you are a Christian, **renew your trust.**
- q. One final thing I like remember when studying Ruth: every prayer in this book is answered. (though the answers were probably different than what they expected!
- r. So, let's respond by praying honest, humble yet hope-filled prayers today. He may not take us **out** of our circumstances, but he has promised to take us **through** our circumstances and turn them into glory.
- s. So, name your circumstance today and be honest. And then declare "but Jesus will have the last word."