

Which Way to the Promised Rest?

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. How can we count God's kindness? Some of us were talking recently about why it is we measure our adult lives in years, but we measure the lives of babies first in weeks and then in months, even when it gets to 20 or 21 months, and my mental maths is struggling to convert that into years. Before they're born, of course, we count the lives of unborn babies in fruit and vegetables. A pea, a plum, a pineapple, apparently 37 weeks is a butternut squash.

But in what unit do we count God's kindness? Well, in the Bible, God's faithful love, his covenant kindness is counted not in months or in years, but in generations. Psalm 100 puts it this way, his love endures forever. How do we know? Well, because his faithfulness continues through all generations. That's the wonderful truth that we got to see displayed this morning in Neil's baptism. God's promises are true for generation on generation. His love held out to us and to our children. God doesn't only deal in years or decades or even lifetimes, but in generations. He is faithful. And this morning, we're beginning to look at a book in the Bible that blows that truth up to cinematic proportions. Maybe the story of Ruth, for you, is well-thumbed and well-trodden ground. Perhaps it's the very first time that you're hearing this story. I wish I could hear it again for the first time. It is a wonderful story. But whether this is the first time or the hundredth time that we're hearing it, it's a story that never gets old because of its place in the story, in the story of God's redeeming king. At first glance, as I read, perhaps it seemed a story about an ordinary family suffering incredible heartbreak. And where we finished, it's hard to see, isn't it, how the life of this family could be redeemed. But by the end of this book, we find that this one small family saga really fits within a bigger story. Because if you've got your Bible open and you would turn over with me to chapter 4 and verse 17, out of the ashes of this small family comes who? Well, Naomi's grandson, Obed, will be the grandfather of David the king. And of course, the story of King David fits inside the biggest story of all because David would be the great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather of the great king, Jesus Christ. Like a set of Russian dolls, these pieces fit within the next bit and the next bit. And we see the same pattern of God's faithfulness on a bigger and bigger and bigger scale. And so God's faithfulness and his kindness in this book to this one small family is like a taste or a seed or a pattern of his kindness that stretches down the generations to Jesus, who brings God's kindness to every family of the earth. And so for us, this book shows us the incredible kindness of God, that it's not only for this one family, but for every family. Because from this family would come a Redeemer for us all.

And if you're in any doubt whether Jesus could possibly be a Redeemer for you this morning, well, look with me at what kind of family our Redeemer came from. Because firstly, we are introduced to a fallen family. Read with me if you would from verse 1. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem and Judah together with his wife and two sons went to live for a while in the country of Moab. And to understand that decision and what's going on there, we need to see the backdrop. It was the days when the judges ruled, we read. What does that mean?

[4 : 3 9] Well, we see if we glance down at the very last verse in the book just before, the book of Judges, in those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. In other words, they were living in a time of anarchy. It was a dog-eat-dog world. There was no social safety net. There was no king on the throne.

Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And while society was tearing itself apart, we find there was also a famine. In the Bible, a famine is a sign of God's anger. We find it in a list of curses that God threatened on his people if they were to turn away from him, which they had big time. And it's in that desperate cauldron of national sin and violence and hunger that we focus in now on this one small family. Now, this zooming in effect is one of the ways the Bible tells us that God is about

to push his rescue plan forward. Genesis 11, the whole world goes crazy trying to build a tower that reaches up to heaven. God said to one man, Abraham, go, and I will make your family a blessing to the whole earth. Much later, of course, a decree goes out.

The whole world has to be registered. It was time for Mary to give birth to a son. Now again, the world is in carnage, but we are pulled right down into the drama of one family, God's covenant family.

But if we're expecting for God's rescue plan to be a quick fix, well, we're going to have to wait a little bit longer because this family's hunger pushes them out of the picture for a while.

Elimelech and Naomi, his wife, their sons Malon and Kilian, went to stay in another country, the country of Moab. And basically, they're getting out of Dodge, aren't they? We see what was going on in that time. Their choice seems sensible. Finding somewhere for your family to eat in a hungry, empty world when there's nothing over here while we go over there. But as sensible as their choice might seem, the reality is, this family was not so much stepping out into the dark unknown as walking headfirst into the darker jaws of death. See, going to Moab for a while was not like commuting to Inverness for work. It was more like defecting to North Korea in the hope of a better life.

[7 : 32] Moab had never, ever been kind to God's people. But this family chooses to leave the land that God promised, a land that once flowed with milk and honey. They leave the town of Bethlehem, the house of bread, in search of something to fill them up in the badlands. They leave God's place for another place.

That shows us just how wrong things had gone in the land. But it also tells us, doesn't it, that this family, however decent and upstanding and sensible they were, were part of the wrongness. Because like the rest of the world, they were only doing what was right in their own eyes. God had promised a place and a people and his presence and a people and his presence and this family was walking away from all three. God's covenant love didn't seem worth sticking around for. Better to try the kindness of Moab than the kindness of God. And despite the hope of better things in Moab, things only go downhill for them, don't they. Naomi watches as her family slowly falls apart. First through the death of her husband and then through the marriage of her sons to Moabite women. And then after 10 years, both her sons die as well. And in the space of 10 years, her whole family becomes names on a headstone.

Elimelech, husband of Naomi, devoted father to Malon and Killian, also buried here. And Naomi, we read, left without her two boys and her husband. What words are there for suffering like that?

Naomi sums it up best herself. I went away full, she says, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Not physically empty, but inwardly in her heart, hollowed out by sadness. What happened to Naomi is intensely tragic. But friends, it is describing the world that we live in. Some of you will know exactly what Naomi is describing. For some of you, you won't yet have come across suffering like that.

But we all know in some way what it's like to have been full and then to be empty. Because we all live in a world that offers fullness and life with one hand and delivers emptiness and death with the other.

[10 : 26] We have all looked for something to fill us, give us life, plant our lives in, in places that have left us empty. I'm not necessarily talking about evil places or wicked things. Naomi's family were good people, trying hard to make their way in the world. But by putting their trust, their hope in the kindness of the world, rather than the kindness of God, they were setting themselves up for a hard and heavy fall.

Looking for blessing and life away from God is always going to leave us hungry, always going to leave us empty. Life away from Christ offers so much. The grass is always greener, but that life is like a mirage in the desert. We can walk and walk and walk. Life in all its fullness looks like it's within walking distance. But that vision of the full life, that promise of eternal life will always be out of reach if we are not walking with Jesus Christ.

Our world offers great things that it cannot deliver. So what good news for us then, that our Redeemer came from this kind of family, a fallen family. Fallen both in the sense that they have chosen to do their own thing, what was right in their own eyes, and fallen also in the sense of having been broken by that fall as they crashed headlong into reality. This is wonderful news for us, because the family of Jesus, the family that Jesus came from, is the family that Jesus came for. Not for the full, but for the empty. Not for the sorted, but for the sinful. He came for people who have

done as we saw fit and searched for fullness and life in an empty and hungry world. People like me and he, who once were lost and now are found. So how can we find rest in him and in his kindness? Well, next, these women show us how, through a crisis of faith. Naomi isn't totally left on her own as she, she goes with her daughters-in-law, Opa and Ruth. Both, remember, from Moab. They weren't born into God's covenant family. But when Naomi gives them a choice, well, one will take hold of God's kindness with both hands. At verse 6, there's a glimmer of hope on the horizon again, isn't there? Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them. So she and her daughters-in-law begin the long walk home. But somewhere along the way, Naomi loses heart, and she brings us quite literally to a turning point in verse 8. Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, go back or turn each of you to your mother's home. She's trying to send these girls back to Moab, back to their family homes, and she thinks she's being kind. Naomi's not a wicked person. She thinks she's doing the best thing. Let's see, in verse 8, what Naomi wants for her daughters-in-law. May the Lord show you kindness.

If you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me, may the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. She prays only that they would know God's kindness. That is, in Hebrew, his hesed, his multi-generational faithful covenant love, and that they would find rest back home. Covenant love, promised rest, both wonderful promises for us held out in Jesus Christ.

But we know that those things are definitely not what they will find if they turn back, because God's love is shown his rest is found in his place where he is. I don't think it's that Naomi's trying to trick them, or that she even necessarily knows what it is she's saying. See, it's as if she sees herself as cursed somehow. Her intense suffering has turned her inwards, blinded her to the kindness of God. Suffering can do that to us, can't it? Switch off the light bulb.

[15:22] We can't see past our own pain, and God's kindness is hidden in the shadow beyond. Now, Naomi doesn't want to bring that kind of suffering on her daughters-in-law, so she tries to send them away from her in the hope that they will find God's blessing somewhere else.

Even when Naomi does get home to Bethlehem, where fullness and life are about to flow, she still cannot see past what she has suffered over the past 10 years. Don't call me Naomi, she says, which means sweet. Rather, call me Mara or bitter, because the Lord has made my life very bitter. Now, at first, these women won't hear of it. They wept aloud and said, we will go back with you to your people. But now Naomi ramps up the pressure. Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons who could become your husbands? Now, for us to get the force of this argument, we have to recognize that without their husbands and without any sons, these three women, in the time that they were living, were in big trouble. They were economically destitute.

They were physically vulnerable. They'd lost their family connections to the wider world. Now, thankfully, we live in a very different time. But back then, in the patriarchal world that it was, a family without men was completely helpless. So Naomi's point isn't that she can't offer them a nice, cozy marriage. It's that she can't offer them a viable life. She can't have any more sons for them to marry, even if she found a husband there and then, she says, and nine months later gave birth to two baby boys. Well, would these women wait that long to marry them and have security again?

In short, Naomi thinks she can't offer them any hope. She can't make life full for them in an empty world. She can't make life sweet for them because the Lord has made her life bitter.

In short, she sees her life as being irredeemable. Now, who would stick around for that? You see, the great cost that these women bear in sticking with Naomi. In purely human terms, it would be a life marked probably by suffering, emptiness, and death. And so hearing this again, verse 14, they wept aloud and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye. One girl decides to turn back and go home.

[18:19] Again, a sensible, a pragmatic, a down-to-earth decision, but ultimately a poor one. She has been kind to Naomi, but kindness has its limits. In the end, she chooses to hope in this world and in this life only. But Ruth clings to her mother-in-law in extraordinary love. Naomi tries once more, verse 15, look, said Naomi, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her. But Naomi's, Ruth's reply is famous for a reason. It is worth reading and reading again and again. Look down with me if you can at verse 16. Ruth replied, don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. 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

deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me. Ruth's answer is incredible because it comes out of nowhere but captures everything that Naomi has been missing. Unconditional kindness, unbreakable love, unending faithfulness. Does Ruth know what she's saying? Well, it's hard to say, but in a few sentences, Ruth has said yes, yes, and yes again to God's own unconditional and unbreakable and unending love. God promised a place and that's where Ruth will go and where she will stay. God promised a people and those people would be Ruth's people. God had promised to be their God and so he will be Ruth's God. Remember, this is we, Ruthie from Moab. She is no one. She is a total outsider, but she leaves her home. She leaves her family. She leaves her life behind. She goes with Naomi, who cannot offer her a home, a family, a life, yet she counts the cost and she chooses to commit her life to this place, to this people, to this God. Even if the outcome is death, she says, where you die,

I will die, I will die, and there I will be buried, because her hope is now not in this life only. She has left her gods, the gods of empty promises, the gods of this world, and she is now clinging to this God, to the Lord, and she has taken hold of his kindness with both hands in life and in death. She's turned from her old life and has entered a new life. I said before, this is literally a turning point. In fact, the verb to turn is found 12 times in this chapter, often translated go back or to return, but in Hebrew, the very same word means repent. She turns, she repents. This is what that looks like in a life. She's turned from the empty promises of her world back home and trusted instead in the life-giving promises of God. Perhaps you're not a Christian here today, or you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, and you cannot imagine doing what Ruth has just done. How can you give up a life, not knowing what would come next, clinging only to God's kindness? Well, turning to the Lord does come with a cost. So think about that. Weigh it up. What do you stand to lose by committing yourself, life, and limb to Jesus? Try it. Make a list. Maybe it will be less than you think. Maybe it will be more. But let me say, whatever could be on that list, whatever it costs you, turning and taking hold of God's kindness in Jesus is fully worth it. To belong to this God, to belong to his people, is better than the best life lived without him.

Perhaps, though, this morning you're swithering on that crossroads. You know God's great and very precious promises, but sometimes life in this world just seems better, better than any life that God could give in his grace. Well, if that's you, friends, don't forget that this world is not kind.

[23 : 23] Have you forgotten so soon the emptiness and hunger of a life lived chasing kindness? Turn to Christ. Embrace his full and free kindness that can never end, and you will never need to go searching again. Perhaps you would love, you would love to live in God's kindness today, but you're just not sure you could. Maybe this life just isn't for you. Perhaps you feel too far on the outside. Perhaps this is all just new to you. Well, friends, if Ruth can turn to the Lord, you can. She was an outsider. It was brand new to her, but she knew enough to know that she couldn't go on without the Lord being her God. And whatever that cost her to do, she knew she needed to do it.

And so to you, the Lord is held out today if you return and take hold of him and his kindness. If you have turned, if you are a Christian today, remember this confession, this beautiful confession of faith is yours too. Whether your turning point was big and dramatic, or whether you can't remember a day when you didn't choose Jesus, he is yours. You are his. His people are your people. Where he is, there you are. He is your hope, both in life and in death. Never forget how wonderful it is to trust him and to follow him. On the days when the cost seems very steep. Come back and read these words again.

On the days where the way feels narrow and hard. Never forget what a wonderful thing it is to find rest in the kindness of God. That's our prayer for Neil. Isn't it that early in his life, this faith would become his faith. That he would learn to cling to Christ and his promises. And he would never know a day without the loving and the kindness of God. Because that is God's promise to anyone who turns and trusts in the Lord Jesus, our Redeemer. And finally, and very briefly, we see that Ruth was indeed right to turn and trust in the Lord. Because lastly, we see God's promise of fullness. The two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. And back in the house of bread, we see Naomi still struggling under the shadow of her suffering. Notice she tries to rename herself. Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara. Don't call me sweet. Call me bitter. Names are important in the Bible. But one thing you can't do is change your own name. Only God can give a new name to symbolize a new relationship with himself.

So by changing her own name, Naomi's trying to change the terms of her relationship with God. Because to her, well, it just feels that everything that's happened in the last 10 years has been

God's heavy handed harshness. I went away full, but the Lord brought me back empty. Why call me sweet?

The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. God's loving kindness is rest that he so wanted for his daughters-in-law. She cannot see it in her own life. But can we see it? [27 : 08] Notice how Ruth seems to disappear from the story as if Naomi has forgotten she's even there. But Ruth herself is God's incredible kindness to Naomi, as she is stuck by her through thick and thin, through life and death. And notice too how the chapter ends. They arrive in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. Yes, the Lord has brought her back empty, but there is every indication that he is about to fill her again. Indeed, if you were to read on, this whole story goes from famine to feast, from empty to full, from life, from death to life. But for now, let's simply be reminded that when life is very hard indeed, and when suffering feels like it's all there is, the Lord's kindness has not failed.

His love has not come to an end. His faithfulness is unending. When we can't see his love in our lives, let us turn our eyes instead to the Lord Jesus, the yes to all of God's precious and very great promises who came in love to fulfill and to redeem our lives from sin and death. He is the one who gives us life in all its fullness. He is the only redeemer for every family of the earth, and he is the only redeemer for us.

So let's turn to him and find rest in him together as we pray. Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you. We thank you, our Father, that he came for us. We thank you, our Father, for the example of Ruth. But Lord, if even she could cling to you, if your love and kindness was big enough for her, so it is big enough for us. So Lord, help us to find refuge in you, we pray.

Lord, if we are far from you, draw us near. Lord, if we have forgotten how good it is to know you, remind us, we pray. Lord Jesus, we pray that you would be everything to us.

[29 : 50] For we ask in your great name. Amen.