

Good morning again and let's turn to the book of Ruth, I love the book of Ruth now in ways I never have before. It is a very powerful book and you'll see that this series is called, "The Gospel According to Ruth." It is called that because we believe that God has purpose, that what he is doing in the world--that is, his redeeming purposes--are made known to us through this book of Ruth. Perhaps you're familiar with the book of Ruth. Perhaps you've read it a number of times. Perhaps you've heard it preached on a number of times. Let me say, however, that it is our goal to spend the next four weeks leading up to Easter on this book, and each week we're going to take another chapter. We don't have enough time to read the entirety of each chapter and preach on it as we'll be here so long, so let me encourage you if you've not read Ruth recently to take the opportunity to read each chapter. But if you are familiar enough with Ruth, then perhaps you'll be so familiar that you're waiting to get to chapter four. In chapter four we learn of this great idea of 'kinsman redeemer.' And it is a great term. But what we don't want to do is to fall into the habit, I think which is very easy to do with the book of Ruth, is to hurry to chapter four, because in chapter one and chapter two and chapter three is a rich, rich story--one that I want us to take time with, one that I want us to look deeply in to see what God is doing and what he has to say to us. So this morning we're going to look at chapter one, but I'm going to be specifically reading verses one through five and then verses fifteen through eighteen. This is God's word. Hear now the gospel according to Ruth.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. They went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she turns to her two daughters-in-law to give them a blessing to send them back to their country. Orpha, decides to take her mother-in-law's blessing, gives her a hug—they both deeply weep—and Orpah turns back home. But Ruth has a different plan, so we pick up the story where Naomi speaks to Ruth.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "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 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 anything but death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me this morning. Come Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, God in Spirit who has been given as a gift to the church. Because without your Holy Spirit, Lord, we simply sit before any chapter and any verse of the Bible dumbfounded, not knowing any idea what it's saying. If it is not for your Holy Spirit, we are without hope. We need you by your Holy Spirit to open our minds, our hearts, and to engage our souls with the radical power of this living word, that we may see what you have to say to us. Teach us the gospel through these women. In Jesus' name, amen.

This morning you'll see on your outline that we're going to be looking at this first chapter through three things: First, Surrounded by Rubble; second Radical Faith; third, Shaft of Light. So three things: Surrounded by Rubble, Radical Faith, Shaft of Light. What we have in the book of Ruth is we have different kinds of pacing as the story unfolds. On some levels the pacing is quite slow, we're allowed to sort of take it in and to sort of get a sense and smell of the place, but in this first chapter we have a very quick pace, particularly verses one through five. And in verses one through five we are entering into the story, the book of Ruth, told through the perspective of Naomi. And what we learn is, we are invited in, if you will, by God, through this portion of His Scriptures--we are invited to come down into the lives of these two women that play most prominently in chapter one, Naomi and Ruth. And we're invited to sit down and look at the metaphorical rubble surrounding their lives. The first thing that we see in this situation, in this story, is utter devastation. In verses one through five with very little other detail we're simply told the facts of the story. We have a covenant family of God, of the Israelites, who were living during the time of Judges, and we know that God was judging his people because of

their disobedience, and there was a famine in the promised land. Now Elimelech said, hmm, I need to provide for my family. He takes his family with his two sons, and they go to Moab, an enemy nation, a nation full of false gods--but there's no famine there. They go, that's all that we know. The text doesn't tell us, and we would have to read into what God thought of that--we don't know what God thought of that, we just see it. Nor do I think we can draw straight lines to what's getting ready to happen by their choice of going to Moab, but it happens. Elimelech dies. Now things are not so bad so far. That's bad enough, she's now a widow. But then his two sons die. And then we're left with this woman, Naomi, and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. The reason why I am so incredibly thankful for this book is because though it tells us the details so very quickly, it doesn't want us to move through it very quickly. We need to stop for just a moment and consider just what utter devastation just happened to these women. And remember that Ruth is in the Bible for a purpose. That purpose is to somehow demonstrate to us who now read it that God is a redeeming God, that he is a God who will make known his love and faithfulness and redemption, and he's going to do it through all kinds of different ways. And here he chooses to do it through the lives of these women. That is utterly fascinating to me. And incredibly ironic. Why? Because not only do we see very quick devastation over the span of ten years in Naomi's life, we are left with at the end most prominent in the chapter is Naomi herself. So not only do we see that she's surrounded by rubble because of the devastation of the loss of two sons and a husband, we see it particularly through the lens of widowhood.

Widowhood. This is very important for us to understand. The reason for that, I think, are threefold. And if you have your pens, write this in your outline. First was devastation, second is widowhood. And there's something about widowhood that we need to learn here. And I think there are three things. There are many, but I'm going to suggest three. First: underside theology; identity, number two; number three, weakness. Number one, underside theology; number two, identity; number three, weakness. Underside theology. What do I mean. It's because this book comes to us and tells us that we are to see God at work through the lens of this widow--therefore, we are called to do theology in the shoes of Naomi, which means we aren't therefore looking at God from a position of privilege, we're looking then at God from a position of poverty—utter, devastating poverty. Why do we say that. Because we say that, as one writer aptly puts, the very word 'widow' itself in Hebrew literally means the following: It means 'unable to speak' and has the root in the idea of 'the silent one.' Therefore, we meet this widow with the following reality, "She's without a husband, a father, a son, or even a male relative to speak or act in her defense. A woman had no voice, no legal rights, and no recourse against injustice. Therefore she was utterly vulnerable." That is important for us to be able to see then what is it like to be in the shoes of this child of the covenant. This Israelite woman whose life has been utterly devastated is now a widow with none of these things, no protection, completely exposed. What does trusting God look like in that situation. And here is the key, one of the keys to Ruth is when you compare her to Job. You see Job gets a lot of attention and rightly so in the Old Testament. It's a longer book. He gets a lot of attention because it talks about suffering and difficulty and trial and doubt and fear and all of that stuff. But guess what---she out-Jobs Job. Think about it. Job still had a wife. She didn't have a husband. He was a man. She is a woman. In other words, what Ruth does is it comes right down into the middle of the world and it splits the world between the haves and the have-nots, and now we need to see God from the have-not side of that equation. And that requires that we do something very different as--and I've written this down--Thabiti Anyabwile—got it, thank you, Pastor Flora's been working hard with me on that—Thabiti Anyabwile, who's a wonderful pastor and most everything he's written is very worth reading. But he wrote recently about doing this underside theology, and he writes this: He says, "Privilege affords a person the ability to think about life in God from above. It allows a person to form conclusions about God in abstraction, detached from the grit and grime of suffering and need. But you can't do that if you're a person who is a persecuted minority, or someone who is utterly disinherited. As one person asked, What does Jesus of Nazareth mean and have to say to the disinherited? What does truth and power look like in the gospel from the underside? How must we think about power and its use when we are the disenfranchised rather than the powerbrokers?" In other words it requires that we begin thinking what it would look like to trust God in Naomi's shoes. And that's hard because as a people sitting in this room, and I think I have it on pretty good authority, that your mere presence here this morning is an example of our privilege. We have a roof over our head. We had some form of food this morning. We got into some form of transportation and traveled from point A to point B. You showed up in clothes. And you will presumably leave this place and go and have lunch or some other form of food later in the day. If we think that that isn't a different vantage point on what it means to trust God, then we are not understanding just how privileged we are. We ought not to feel guilty about our privilege, however, I want to be careful in saying that. But seeing trust of God, seeing devastation through the eyes of Naomi and Ruth requires that maybe we begin to think about

our privilege differently. Isn't it Jesus who says to us, to whom much is given, much is required? Now typically as western Christians we think of well, 'the much is required' part of that phrase, but let's back up a second and think about the first part of that phrase, 'to whom much is given.' Every thing we have is a gift. The paycheck that we have, the gifts that you employ, the words that you use is all a gift. And from a human perspective, we have won life's lottery because we are now presently in the United States of America. Do we feel guilty about that? No. But maybe we need to say if Naomi can begin to be challenged in trusting God in the midst of her devastation, then how, Lord, are you calling me with all the gifts of privilege to be a gift to those who don't have it. I don't know what that looks like in what God may ask you to do. I don't know what that looks like for us as a church, but I know this: that we've been given privilege for a reason and maybe we need to ask, Lord, thank you, everything we have is from you. Now how do you want us to use it? Maybe it begins by asking who the Naomi's are and Ruth's in our lives. Who are the disenfranchised? Where's the cup of cold water that I need to give? Where is the bread that I need to offer someone else? Just a question, but this book forces us to take off our shoes of privilege and put on the shoes of Naomi and learn what does it mean to trust God then from a place of devastation. It's upside-down theology.

Secondly: identity. You see now we look at Naomi's situation. She doesn't have a husband, she doesn't have sons now, she doesn't have male children. Okay all of that—I said the same thing twice. Okay, you take all that into consideration and it's easy for us to wag the finger and say, well, the problem is she lived in a patriarchal period, a patriarchal generation. The problem was her culture. If she was freed from all that cultural stuff she would have been okay. Really?! Now, it's true that during that time your identity was bolstered by your ability to have children, specifically male children, and to be married. But it's easy for us to wag the finger and say, well, Naomi, now, don't get your identity from the culture. But I will say we are as beholden to getting our identity from our culture as she was hers. I was thinking about this last week. I am a---don't send me an invitation--- but I am, finally after a few billion people, decided to join Facebook. And I've curiously noticed something, okay, and people really get into how many 'likes' you have, or how many 're-tweets' you have. Now I've been a twitterer for a while, and I like it, I like it when somebody retweets my idea, and that's great. Well, isn't it interesting that we consider page-views, re-tweets and likes and mentions as an actual engagement with another human being, then we translate that into some kind of value that bolsters our self-identity. Okay, maybe some of you are saying, I so don't do that. Okay. Here's what happened to me this last week. I'm forty-two years old and I got my first skateboard when I was four years old. I love skateboarding. But this last week while waiting on an appointment, I was waiting for them to arrive, so I walked into a skate shop where there were five employees. I was not wearing skate stuff. I was just looking my normal self. Every one of those employees came up to me and didn't say, oh sir, can I help you?---it was more, sir....can I help you....? It was so clear---you are so lost, and imagine what that did to me on the inside. And then I went to the back where this guy was putting together this skateboard. I just picked up a magazine. He says, hey, you looking to get back into skateboarding? And I said, I don't really pay attention to the magazines anymore. And he said, well, if you did, you need to pay attention to *Thrasher* magazine. Okay, and that doesn't mean anything to you, but I wanted to look at him and go, man, I was reading *Thrasher* magazine before your parents were even married. What was I looking for? What was I looking for? Cultural respect. He was offending my pride, and I wanted to prove myself. I didn't say that, but I said it on the inside—I'm still guilty for it. I said it on the inside. I felt it. Here's the thing. Are we not beholden to our culture? Let's be careful and not judge Naomi's, but recognize she was falling prey to feeling devastated because she didn't measure up. Well neither do we.

But there's a third thing, it's weakness. This widowhood allows us to understand weakness in a new way. You see the Bible is oftentimes about using the weak to shame the strong. You see the truth is, in that moment where that man told me what he said to me, and even as I read this book, and even as we read this book, we need to come to grips with the fact that we're all Naomis and Ruth's. Spiritually speaking we are without hope, we're without a home, we're without a husband, without sons. We are incredibly and utterly impotent, spiritually. Because we have a God who is holy, who says, I am holy, therefore, be holy. And all that does is devastate us. But the point is, that in the midst of that devastation, God uses weakness to shame the strong. The message is, because we're all Naomis, we all need rescue. We're all looking for our petty identities outside of who God said we are in him. We all recognize just how devastating this could be, but in reality how distant we have grown to what it means to trust in God in the midst of devastation. We've taken our privilege for granted. But whether we're privileged or devastated, whether we're white or black, male or female, Moabite or Israelite---before a holy God we are without hope. And we are in need of his rescue.

And isn't it amazing, ladies and gentlemen, and it ought to electrify and I pray that it does, that God has something to tell us through the radical faith of Ruth. Because while in the one moment Naomi and her widowhood is devastated, he has a plan for her. It's the plan for us--everybody who can hear this message is going to be impacted by the next few words. Because what happens in Ruth is radical faith. Let's look together. Okay, so we learn in verses fifteen to eighteen that Naomi is looking at Ruth, and she says, look, you're free to go. You have my blessing. It makes sense—go. But what we find in this choice Ruth makes is radical faith. We see it's radical faith, it's true biblical faith because what?....it's absolute foolishness in the eyes of the world. Because as bad as Naomi's situation is, Ruth's is yet a step farther down. Why do I say that? Because Naomi is going back to Bethlehem and Ruth is going with her. Now, Ruth has now said, instead of going back home where I likely face the opportunity to be remarried and have children, I'm going to unite myself to you. She's been living in Naomi's house, she's seen the worship of the one true God, she's heard of the covenant-keeping God of Israel, and yet she has not pledged faith. Here she now says, I'm going to embrace you, Naomi, and I'm going to go back to a foreign land as a Moabitess woman who's claiming faith, and she has no husband or sons. That is what she does. It is an utterly foolish thing to do, which shows us again not only does God use the weak to shame the strong, he uses foolishness to shame the wise. And that is a going to be a consistent theme, and we see it right here with Ruth's courageous choice to take a step to believe. There's something that has gripped her heart. There is something that has gripped her mind that she will not listen to Naomi, her mother-in-law's instruction to go back. She embraces Naomi. Now here's the crazy thing. Why it's even more foolish is because look what Naomi does. It tells us, verse eighteen. "When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her." From there, all the way back to Bethlehem, we have no other recorded conversation. The woman to whom she's just pledged her faithfulness, now----quiet. She stopped urging her. So not only is it foolishness in the eyes of the world, it's foolishness in the sight of Naomi. But that's what brings out such radical faith. It's not just the foolishness of biblical faith that we see here exhibited at what God is doing in route, we also see something else about radical biblical faith, and that is, it's selfless. Get this. You can see here by the end of chapter one there is absolutely no promise of a return of investment for Ruth. She pledges her faith and faithfulness, devotion, love, and familial relationship to Naomi without any guarantee there will be a payoff. I got to the end of chapter one and I began to pray, Lord, I confess I do not have a faith like Ruth. I'm blown away by the gift that Ruth is to the Bible. Because God allows us to see His working of radical, foolish, yet selfless, biblical faith in the life of this woman that causes me to ask a question which I've said before and will use it again: How much of my faith in Jesus Christ and in the God of the Bible and my pledge of obedience to him is really more a matter of convenience between what I want and what God requires? How many of my choices in following Jesus are selfish, not selfless? How many of my decisions to follow Him are really a hedge against losing something? I want something in return. By the end of chapter one there is no promise of return for Ruth. In fact, there's just the opposite. There's only the promise of further difficulty and suffering. We need to hear this faith. We need this faith to speak and challenge our faith.

But know this: it is God who wrought this faith in Ruth, and He desires to bring it about in our lives, because he wants us to see the shaft of light. Do you see it. Perhaps you don't; let's look together. Now this was not on the screen, so follow along. This is what happens as they go back to Bethlehem. "So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem the whole town was stirred because of them. The women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" Okay, in antiquated times, this is your life going viral. Nobody needed a screen, just word-of-mouth. She's coming back and what does she say, "I went away full, but I come back empty." So the shaft of light only makes sense when you realize the darkness from which she is speaking. She's speaking from her own heart, and let us be careful not to see Naomi's as just a sort of complaining, widow crank. This is a woman whose life has been utterly devastated. And she says, I've come back empty. Now, okay, just pause on the sermon. Think about Ruth. Ruth is with her. She's now gone back with her. She's in Bethlehem, and she just hears her say, I went away full, I've come back empty. Ruth's, "What?!? Wait a second. Not exactly empty." All right, who knows what she thought, we don't know. But that that also speaks to how Ruth may have been feeling—empty. And what's interesting, and again, do you mind?---we need to put our feet into the shoes of Naomi. You see, as a widow, her clothing would've reflected her inward state. They see her coming---and men in the congregation this morning, none of us have a shred of evidence of what it is actually like to wake up as a woman in this culture today. We all know the truth: the fifty is not the new thirty. People are constantly throwing creams and solutions at the women sitting here in this room, and they are constantly being told that our value is determined on their weight, on their looks, and so forth. None of us as men understand what it's like to wake up as a woman in her room, and know what it would be like to enter

this room without makeup and our hair being styled. We have no idea what that's like. This woman is empty. And now the other women are saying, you know what? This can't be Naomi! Do you see the emptiness? Now I want you to see the light. Which, by the way, we need to be praying for our women. We need to pray that their value is not caught up in that, and how are we contributing to it. Just a free thought.

But the shaft of light is in this one sentence from Ruth. She says, where you die I will die. Where you are buried, I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. Ruth says this to a woman whose name is Naomi, which means 'sweetness.' And in her return to Bethlehem she changes it to a name that means 'bitterness.' And yet, to this woman she has said, I will be your family, though you have none. I will be faithful to you, though it feels like nobody's been faithful to you. Nobody was waiting with Naomi at the streets like a twentieth anniversary reunion. She was devastated, yet Ruth speaks the words of God into Naomi's life. Now I want you to know it doesn't break through Naomi's heart yet. It doesn't break through, but it doesn't mean we don't need to hear what God is saying to Naomi through Ruth. Here's the first part of the shaft of light. Here it is. Ruth is a Moabitess. Why does that matter? She's not an Israelite. That God is going to speak to one of his own children, Naomi, through the mouth of a woman born to an enemy country, who used to worship false gods, who's now been radically saved, with a radical faith, and now God is speaking to Naomi through Ruth. And we know at the end of this tale that begins here, this shaft of light that begins with the words of Ruth, we realize that through Ruth would come Obed. Through Obed would come Jesse. Through Jesse would become David--all the way to Jesus--from Adam to Jesus, fourteen generations. And God would decide to do it through a Moabite widow pledging her faithfulness to this Naomi. That is a shaft of light. It is God saying to Naomi, though she cannot hear it yet, God is saying through Ruth, I love you. You say you have no family, I just made Ruth one of my family, and because of that she will minister to you, and through Ruth I will minister to you. Do you see? God is saying, I love you, and I will not let you go. We're getting ready to sing a hymn in just a moment called, "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go." We need to sing that song, and we need to think about this story because here's the reality. The reality is, she pledges her faithfulness to Naomi, that God would deal with her so severely if she were not faithful. That becomes a shaft of light that not only shows us what she will do, being in the lineage of Jesus, it also points us to Jesus, because it was Jesus who says, I love you to death. Just as Ruth pledged her faithfulness, her love, her care and devotion, Jesus pledges his love. He pledges his faithfulness to death, through death, over death, to provide us a way out of our spiritual emptiness and devastation before a holy God. He has loved us, and that love will not let us go. And we need the story of Ruth and Naomi to see God from their perspective, and to see how amazing God is that he would do this through these two women.

You see, the hymn we're getting ready to sing---I'm thankful for Kevin Twit, he's the brother of our own Kory Twit, and Kevin and I went to seminary together, and he teaches about the history of hymns. The writer of this hymn that we're going to sing, his name is George Matheson. George Matheson in seminary began to go blind. And he was engaged to a woman—and I'm sorry if I've told this story before, I'm just blown away by it, here you go—so he was engaged to a woman who left him because she did not want to be married to a man who was going to have that kind of disability. He went to live with his sister. This hymn was written on the very same night that his sister was packing her bags to go and be married the next day. So after she was married, he wrote this. He said something of an awful sadness passed between me and the Lord. And he says, then I wrote this hymn in the space of about fifteen minutes as if it were dictated to me. And in the third stanza, Kevin Twit taught me, as there is this phrase, "I chase rainbows through the rain." And he said the word 'bow' there that he chose in writing the hymn is the same word that is used for a battle bow. And you see, as a rainbow it has its arch pointing upward, not downward, therefore to give the reminder that God has a battle bow and he has let loose the battle arrow, but not at us, at himself, namely in his son, Jesus Christ. And he pledges his faithfulness, promises his love and devotion that will not let us go, and he's shown us and given us his son and his death and his resurrection as a promise to say, I have a love that did not let go my son, and through him I will never let you go. I will never forsake you, and I will never leave you. And all of the promises for you are yes and Amen in Christ Jesus.

Now I have no idea where you are this morning on your journey with Christ. If you are a Christian and you are presently facing devastation because you are stuck in a sin that you feel you cannot be freed from, I tell you this morning, there is a love that loves you in the midst of your sin, and God wants to rescue you and show you the freedom alone in Jesus Christ. There are Christians here this morning that are questioning, like Naomi, my life is empty. You need to hear the words of Ruth that point us to the words of Christ: I will never leave you and

my death proves it. For those of you who don't know Christ, maybe it's not this sermon, but maybe you're beginning to ask questions. Maybe Christianity is something very different. I ask you to investigate the truths of the Scriptures: that God is a redeeming, rescuing God, and he wants your heart, and he loves you, and he has pursued you since the creation of the world. And this morning I stand before you in his name, saying, come to him and find your rest. Find your home, for you will never know what home is like outside of the Lord your God. Know him today.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, teach us this morning through your Spirits the grief in grace through the life of Naomi and Ruth. May we hear what you were doing in the most ironic of ways that seems to us foolish, but it is oh, so wise. It's a weakness, but in truth it's stronger than anybody could ever measure. Your grace in our midst, come and work through these widows. Show us your redeeming plan and may your love never let us go. In Jesus' name, amen.