

Title: Believe, again
Text: Ruth 1
Series: Ruth #1
Theme: The amazing and delightful providences of God
Prop Stmtnt: God's heavy hand is a providential and gracious hand

I have anticipated preaching this book ever since we started in the book of Judges. I am preaching this sermon to you as if you are a follower of Christ, meaning, you have repented of your sin and have trusted in the death of Christ for your forgiveness and the life of Christ for your righteousness and in so doing you have surrendered the authority of your life to Christ as your king. Now, I know that not all of you have done that. So, if you are not a genuine follower of Christ, my prayer is that you will hear and even feel in your soul the benefits of following Christ, and even during this message, come to faith in Christ.

Read Text:

Recently, a member asked me to give her a clear definition of grace. Grace is a big word. Grace is a prominent in the New Testament that is built on the hesed of God in the OT. Hesed is a Hebrew word that cannot be captured and fully expressed by a single English word. When this word appears in the O.T., it is often translated "kindness" or "steadfast love" but hesed is the covenant love of God that is expressed in his fierce and devoted loyalty to his people through his mercy, grace, goodness, generosity, benevolence, forgiving nature, and predisposition to act on their behalf. God stands ready to act on behalf of his people. Hesed in the O.T. is also similar to agape in the N.T. It is a highly and beautiful relational word whereby one person acts for the benefit of another without concern that the other person might gain a decided advantage as a result, or without concern that it may not benefit the one acting for the good of the other. It is an idea that is void of "what's in it for me." Therefore, when we see it, we are intrigued by it. We are attracted to it.

The book of Ruth is full of the hesed of God. But it comes as a surprise. This story is a love story, but what makes this love story so endearing and enduring is that this love story is driven by the greatest love story. The story of Ruth is a story of deep grief, shame, fear, rejection, loneliness, then hope, honor, suspense, boldness, social norms turned upside down, ecstasy, love, and resolution. The empty arms and broken heart of chapter 1 are full and mended by the end of chapter 4. The years of grief in chapter 1 and are changed in a single day in chapter 2 all of which are here to remind us and to convince us of the covenant love of God that is always acting on the good of his children. May God use this book to help you believe again.

One of the surprises of this book is the title. It is only one of two books in the Bible named after a woman. But unlike Esther, Ruth is not Jewish. Ruth is from Moab. The Moabites descended from Moab who was conceived through an incestuous relationship between Lot, the nephew of Abraham and one of Lot's daughters. The Moabites settled in the land east of the Jordan River. They were an idolatrous nation. So, while the Israelites and the Moabites shared some similar genetics, they did not share a similar promise. When Israel asked permission to travel through a small piece of the land of Moab on the way from Egypt to Canaan, the Moabites refused, and then attacked them. Later Moabite women seduced a number of Israelite men resulting in a

national crisis in Numbers 25. And remember that it was Eglon, the king of Moab who oppressed Israel in Judges 3. Therefore, a person from Moab was generally not welcome in Israel. So, a Bible named after a woman from Moab? This ought to turn your world upside down. If you are thumbing through the story line of the OT, your thumb should get stuck on the book of Ruth and you should be asking yourself, what is a girl like you, from a people like that doing in a story like this? Then, of course, you ought to ask yourself even as we look around and ask one another, “What are people like us, doing in a story like this?” The answer is hesed. God’s covenant love is so beautiful, so captivating, so compelling, so comforting, so trustworthy, and so surprising. We should never abandon it for any other love. But, we do and so did Israel. That is why...

God’s hesed is often found in God’s judgment. Initially that sounds contradictory. How can someone who loves me, judge me? God judges us, corrects us, and disciplines us in order to protect us from soul-rotting, guilt-condemning, shame-inducing, life-destroying sin. The correction of God is driven by God’s love of his own righteousness and his fierce love for his children. A parent who does not discipline consistently is a parent who does not love deeply. God’s hesed is often found in his judgment. The opening verse sets the drama with 2 eye raising statements and one head shaking response. The first eye-raising statement is the opening phrase; “*In the days when the judges ruled.*” Immediately our internal alarms are sounding. The days of the Judges were days of violence, rebellion, idolatry and unfaithfulness. These were dark days. This would have been a tough time to raise a family in Israel. Therefore, we are not expecting something good. Our experience with the days of the Judges has been raw, ugly and extremely disheartening. The second statement reinforces it: “*there was a famine in the land.*” For OT Israel, the only reason why there would have been a famine would be because of the judgement of God. Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 warned the nation that when they turned from God, that they would experience famine. You see...

I. God’s judgment is intended to drive us to God. (1.1-5)

Beloved, God’s capacity for love is beyond our capacity to comprehend. His covenant love, his covenant mercy, his covenant to you secures his affection and resolve to care well for you no matter what. There is absolutely nothing in all of time and eternity that is better for us and more satisfying to us than this. Therefore, to value or pursue something else would be foolish.

Imagine that you take your child to the world’s greatest play scape and splash pad. Everything that a child could want for hours of fun is there. Surrounding the play scape and splash pad is a fence and on the other side of the fence is field of poison ivy that has grown over broken glass bottles, rusty nails, razor blades and thorn bushes where thousands of snakes and poisonous spiders live. On your way to the park you tell him about the joy of the play scape and splash pad, but you also warn him about the dangerous field. You let him know that if he takes one step toward that field that you will be on him like ugly on ape. You get out of the van and your child takes one look at the playscape and runs to the fence in order to climb over and explore the field. Do you let him go because you don’t want to stifle his spirit or cramp his creativity and self-expression? Do you shrug your shoulders and let him go because it would take too much effort on your part to stop him? Do you let him go because you fear that he will cry and be angry with you and threaten to not like you? Your response depends on two things. 1) Do you believe and therefore keep your own word? 2) Do you love your kid? Foundational to parenting is making

promises and keeping them. If you tell your kid that there are going to be consequences for sinful behavior and you do not keep your word, then you are lying to your kid. Lying to your child is not loving your child. God does not lie to his kids. God loves his kids. He makes promises and keeps them, even promises of warning. God is serious about his word and serious about pursuing your good.

God knows that no one can love you like he can love you. No one can forgive you, provide for you, sustain you, treasure you, and give you life forever like he can. God is the play scape and splash pad. And when we choose to pursue other things, then God, who promised that he would discipline us, discipline us. Why? Because his judgment is intended to drive us to him. The famine was intended to reveal the failure of the Baals and Asherahs. They cannot sustain you. The famine is God's grace disguised as God's judgement. Bethlehem means house of bread. That sounds like a cruel joke. The house of bread has no bread.

So, this man from Bethlehem decides that he is going to escape God's discipline. He is going to sojourn in the land of Moab, which probably means that he intends to hire himself and his family out as itinerate farmers until the famine in Israel is over. Moab is really close to Israel, which tells us that the famine was local to Israel. Waiting out the famine in Moab sounds reasonable. But, there are two problems with it. If the famine is God's judgment, then the response should be repentance and faith. There is nothing about that here and secondly, there is no sacrificial system in Moab. Leaving the land of correction means that he is leaving the land of promise. The covenant of God with the people of God was tied directly to them being in the land because the tabernacle and the sacrificial system was in the land. Without the sacrifices, there was no means of forgiveness. Elimelech, who is named in v.2, leads his family away from God when he leads them out of the land. How is their sin to be atoned? How can they worship Yahweh apart from the tabernacle? The judgement of God that was intended to drive him back to God becomes an excuse for him to run further away. Things only get worse, much worse. The author does not have to tell us about Elimelech's failure. The story does it for us.

They didn't just sojourn in Moab, they stayed there. In fact, Elimelech died there. His widow, Naomi is left with two boys in a foreign country. The boys each marry a woman from Moab. They are now immersed in Moabite ways and religion. The Caananization of Israel happened one person and one family at a time. Here it happens to this family. Then, the boys died. The stage is set at the end of verse 5. "*The woman was left without her two sons and her husband.*" Left. Left behind. Left alone. Left. Abandoned. Her sons and their wives had no children. What is going to happen to this woman? What is going to happen to these women? Orpah and Ruth could most likely remarry. Naomi? What is going to happen to her? Who will take care of her?

She decides to return. In fact, "return" is the key word of this chapter. Her decision to return looks like her hand has been forced by God. This really is her only option. But God is not being cruel. He is forcing her hand. He is blocking her from staying in the poison ivy and broken glass and leading her back to the play scape. She doesn't see that yet. The clouds of providence hide the mercies of God, but the mercies of God are all over this opening chapter. Then something happens that we never saw coming.

II. God's grace does not always fit our categories. (1.6-22)

The story opens without conversation. The rest of the chapter is full of dialogue. Naomi is about to experience the grace of God. She doesn't know it. She doesn't see it and is unable to recognize it even when it is standing in front of her. This was not how her life was supposed to go. She did not plan for this. You are not supposed to bury your children. You are not supposed to lose everything. You are not supposed to be left all alone to fend for yourself in a harsh and unforgiving world. But God sends her grace and shows her hesed in a way that she never expected.

The first hint is found in v.6. Naomi heard (presumably while working in the fields of Moab) that the famine was over Israel. The rains had returned. Yahweh had visited his people and had given them food. There is bread again in the house of bread (Bethlehem). It doesn't sound like Naomi needed much time to pack her belongings, because she doesn't have anything. The woman, who left Bethlehem with a husband and two sons, is prepared to return with nothing. This will be hard. But, she is at least going to return. There is land that belongs to her. Then, in what really looks like deep affection between this mother and her daughters in law, Naomi blesses them. Verses 8 and 9 are exceedingly tender. These women have grieved together. They each have buried a husband. And in this blessing, Naomi demonstrates a deep affection for these girls and a flicker of faith in God, but she also addresses the reality of her situation.

There is no future for you girls with me. If you are going to be provided for, if you are going to have a husband and have children, you have to stay with your people. I cannot provide that for you. They both insist on going with her, but she will not have it and speaks very pointedly about the facts as they are. Naomi is practical but she is also bitter and says so. The hand of the LORD has been bitter against me. You need to separate from me. I am cursed. It is better for you not to be around me. There is no logical reason for Orpah or Ruth to stay with her. She will go alone. You stay here. You stay with your people. Orpah concedes and after many tears and hugs, leaves to go back to her mother's home. Ruth will not. Naomi speaks again. Do what Orpah did. Leave me alone! Go back home! Stay with your people and with your gods!

Then Ruth speaks. And in this moment, the story changes. We don't know, but the soundtrack is now in a major key. And when you listen to what this girl says, it is gripping. This girl from Moab delivers one of the most memorable speeches in all of Scripture. Do you see what is going on here? Naomi, you can't give me anything. I know that. There is no future for me with you. I know that. There is no logical and practical reason for me to stay with you. I know that. But, I am not leaving. This is not some flimsy, cheap, "Hey, love ya girl (now get out of my life)" throw away line. This is hesed. But Naomi cannot grasp it. Naomi cannot conceive that anyone would love her like this because she does not believe that God loves her like this.

We all know too well, that when you are abused or rejected, that you struggle with believing that you could ever be loved. Many of you have shut yourself off from the love of other people because you think that there is something fundamentally flawed with you that makes you unworthy of being loved. You live in this vicious cycle of trying to earn the favor of others while rejecting it when it comes. Why? Like Naomi, you are looking at life through the wrong set of lenses. You are interpreting your circumstances through your grid, instead of through God's word. There are many couples here whose marriages I have performed. I've given a lot of thought to this truth and therefore in recent years I have told many of you that you need the

transforming power of the gospel in your life, not only to love each other as Christ loves, but you need the transforming power of the gospel to enable you to receive that love and believe that love and enjoy the acceptance of that love. I don't know if there is anything more beautiful in a marriage than a wife who knows, believes and embraces the self-sacrificing and devoted love of her husband. You will learn to accept the imperfect love of others, when your heart and mind are immersed in the perfect love of God. At this point, Naomi doesn't get it. Like us, it is a long road to belief.

Now Ruth takes over. Her speech is like a 5-couplet poem and in these five 2-line statements she wins our hearts. Can you imagine someone saying this to you? Can you imagine someone saying to you, "I will love you forever. I will be with you forever. I will take care of you forever. I will treasure you forever. I will never leave you or forsake you. When you pass through the water, I will be with you. When you are in the midst of the storm, I will be there. When you are in the desert, I will be there. I have you in the palm of my hand. I will be under you, over you, around you, before you, behind you and in you. I have written your name on the palm of my hand. You are mine. I bought you when I died for you. I secured you when I rose again for you. And I will come again for you. Can you imagine someone saying this to you? He has? Do you believe him?"

Ruth ends with an oath. She calls upon God to curse her if she did not do what she just promised. Well, what is Naomi supposed to do with that? She can't command her to break an oath to God, can she? Naomi concedes and says no more. The two women now head to Bethlehem.

Do you see what just happened? Ruth was a picture of hesed to Naomi. It is true that Naomi had nothing to give Ruth, but Ruth loved her anyway. Ruth was committed to her anyway. Ruth was going to take care of her anyway. God's mercy was being poured out on Naomi in the person of Ruth, but Naomi couldn't see it, at least not yet. We don't know yet how this will turn out. We don't know how these two women are going to survive. Naomi thinks she is cursed and Ruth is a Moabitess. But, we know this. We like this Ruth girl and we want Naomi to see what we see.

It's been at least 10 years since Naomi left. Her return is the talk of the little village. The question of, "*is this Naomi?*" speaks volumes. Grief and hard labor in the fields of Moab have taken their toll and it shows. The women of the village can hardly believe their eyes. Naomi looks broken. The hard miles of a difficult life are etched deep in her face. The bitterness of soul is expressed in her words. Do not call me Naomi (which means pleasant) because my life is not pleasant. Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. There is no repentance, is there? There is a difference between humiliation and humility. Naomi is humiliated, but not humble. The resentment in her heart leaks out of her words. No acknowledging of guilt, no admitting of error. Just blaming God and yet, standing right next to her is the mercy of God that defies explanation. How do you account for Ruth? How do you explain this girl who is willing to leave her own family, her own people, her own country in order to care for you at the cost of rejection, scorn and loneliness when you are gone? Do you see how the chapter ends? "*And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*" We have to smile. Just as Naomi did not realize that Ruth was the hesed of God to her, Bethlehem did not know that Naomi and Ruth would be the hesed of God to them and Israel had no idea that Bethlehem, of all places would be the hesed of God to them, and of course the world did not

know that Israel would be the focal point of the hesed and grace of God to them. The hesed of God is powerful. It is personal. It is also patient.

III. God's grace is patient with our feeble faith.

Imagine a lifeguard 6'4" with bulging muscles standing in 5 feet of water at the edge of a swimming pool with his arms stretched out urging a 40lb. 5-year old boy on the edge of the pool to jump to him. The little boy is fearful that he will drown and the lifeguard is telling him, "I cannot and will not let that happen." We are the 5-year old boy. Like Naomi, we do not understand our own circumstances. Our tendency is to blame God and believe that the Almighty is against us. But God does not give us what we deserve and he is patient to wait us out in order to convince us that he really is for us. He knows that as time goes on, you will eventually see what you cannot see now. No, you do not know how God will work all things together for your good. But you do not need to know how he will do it. You just need to know that he will do it. And trust him.