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## Sermon

### ***Hesed: Love that will not let me go***

**Ruth 1; Judges 2**

7<sup>th</sup> November 2021

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Today we start a three week series on the little book of Ruth. This is a very human story of a family going through difficult times. Like any good story it has threat and rescue, drama, romance and a good ending.

As the same time, I want to pick up a theme through the book. It is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is translated goodness, loving-kindness, steadfast love, faithfulness, mercy. Professor Alec Motyer said *hesed* “combines the warmth of God’s fellowship with the security of his faithfulness.”<sup>1</sup>

Let’s start the story: Long ago there was a family - a husband, wife and two sons. He was a farmer with land but times were hard, there was a drought, the crops failed.

He heard there was food in a neighbouring country, and so they packed up and set off. There was food there so they settled down to make a living. A bit like a Kiwi bloke taking his missus and kids over to Aussie to make a bigger buck.

Now hold on we need to introduce them properly.

**When was this?** Well it was in ancient Israel in the time of the Judges. Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Then Joshua had led them into the land and they had settled down. There Israel was ruled by Judges. When Joshua died, as we heard in the first reading, the people largely forgot and turned away from following the Lord to local idols. Twice in the Book of Judges, we read, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Judges 7:16, 21:25 [ESV])

That is a recipe for anarchy. Don’t we see something of the same across the western world, as obedience falters and selfishness rises? Isn’t that part of the problem in our society when people do what is right in their own eyes without regards for the greater good?

From events later in the story, we can work out that this couple were of the generation who were children of those who conquered the land. This is the generation described in Judges 2:10:

“After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. [TLB]

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by David Atkinson in “BST: The Message of Ruth”, 1983, p44

**The couple were called Elimelech and Naomi.** They were of the tribe of Judah with land in Ephrathah which means 'fruitful.' Their village was Bethlehem which means 'house of bread.'

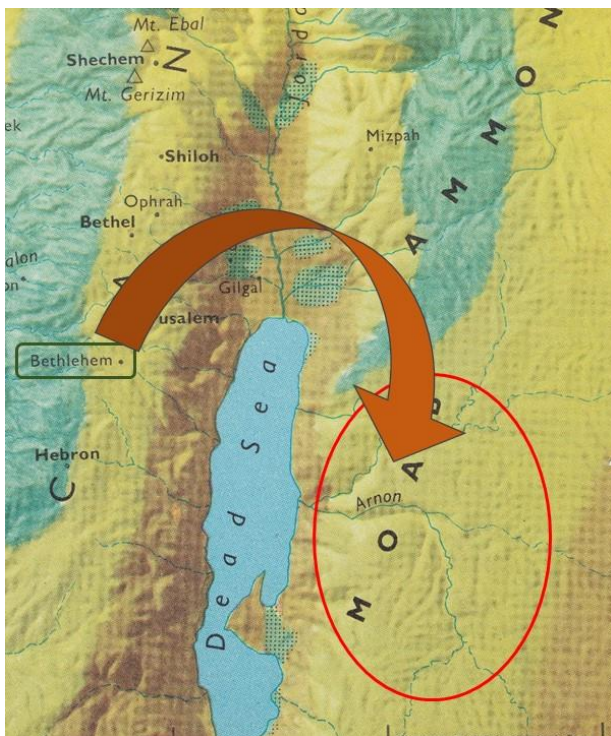
These names have meanings. Elimelech means 'God is my king' and Naomi means 'pleasant.'

You may remember that last week, one of the titles of God was 'The Lord is my portion.' I said that the portion originally related to the allotment of land. Elimelech's portion was at Bethlehem. That was the provision made for his family by God. It was intended that a family never lose their land. Under the law of Jubilee, all land reverted to its allotted ownership twice a century.

They are within a generation of arriving at the Promised Land. It is staggering that an Israelite would leave the land. You would think the stories would be told over and over but it doesn't take long for us to forget the Lord's goodness ourselves - let alone our children remembering what happened to their parents. That is a reminder to rehearse to ourselves the goodness of the Lord so we will not forget.

God had fed his people every day in the wilderness with manna. To go out of the promised land was a huge step - a step of desperate unbelief. It said Yahweh cannot provide for us in the land of milk and honey. God is my King? Elimelech's actions belied his name. He left his allotted land in a place called fruitful and from a town called the house of bread.

Wherever he went it would be outside the promise of God. But he went to Moab!



Now Moab had been hostile to them as they passed by that land. Although, Israel had intended them no harm, the King of Moab had recruited Balaam the prophet to curse Israel. Why turn from the true God to a people who curse?

Elimelech displayed weak faith when he left Canaan, the land of promise. He sinfully doubted his security in God's country. Yet, he could have easily justified this move; after all, he only wanted to feed his family. Then again, we too sin even with the best of intentions.

Whatever Elimelech hoped for in Moab, it was not a good move. He put himself outside the promise, the plan and the provision of God. He did not show faithfulness to the Lord. This was not *hesed* but the opposite.

Now, Elimelech and Naomi had two sons with the rather unpromising names of 'Weak' (Chilon) and 'Sickly' (Mahlon).

Over the next ten years the father died and the boys married local girls, Orpah & Ruth. It is not known what Orpah meant to the Moabites, but the name Ruth is derived from "friendship".

Then tragically, both the young men died so now there were 3 widows. In ancient cultures the plight of a widow was unenviable; she had no right of inheritance. The word 'widow' carried undertones of loneliness, abandonment and helplessness. Her one hope for recovery of social status was to marry again.

What could Naomi do? She needed protection and provision. Then news came that things were different back home, there was food there again and so she decided to go home to her people.

Her daughters-in-law started to go with her. But Naomi thought it would better for them with their families and tried to send them home. In Moab, there was extended family to provide for them and protect them while they each looked for another husband. They would be safe, cared for and not just in their own culture but their own families.

Naomi showed generous and kind intentions for their good. It disadvantaged her, if they left her. It is clear later in the story that she was too old to be labouring in the fields, she needed young help. But she puts their needs before her own in urging them to go back to their people and their families. She shows a self-sacrificial care for them. It is not called *hesed* in the text, but practically that is exactly what it is. She desires the best for them in spite of the cost to herself.

Where *hesed* does appear is in her blessing of them:

“May the LORD show kindness (*hesed*) to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” (v8-9)

What depth of feeling Naomi must have had for her daughters-in-law when she prayed that the Lord would grant that they find a home. She expected God would bless them but sadly she saw only bitterness for herself since “the LORD's hand has gone out against me!”

Still the young women persisted tearfully that they would go with her to her people, Naomi told them she could not provide husbands for them. We need to understand a Hebrew law here. If a man died without children, it was the duty of his brother or next of kin, to take the widow as a wife. Their first son would be regarded as the heir of the dead man so his line would not be blotted out. Naomi was telling them she could not provide a brother-in-law for them to replace their dead husbands. This law is key to the development of the story and we will return to it in the third sermon of this series.

Finally, Orpah relented, kissed her and went back to her land and, significantly, “to her gods.”

Not so Ruth. Ruth refused to leave Naomi. She poured out her commitment in the most beautiful words. It is a covenant – a most solemn promise. In the ancient world, there were all sorts of covenants: marriage obviously, covenants of submission to overlords, but also those of mutual support, friendship and protection especially for warriors.

She promised to go with Naomi even to a foreign land (*Where you go I will go*) and to stay with her (*Where you stay I will stay*).

It meant leaving her own people & their gods to become part of Israel and follow Yahweh (*Your people will be my people and your god, my god*). We know she embraced the Lord because she invoked him by name in support of her vow when she said, “May Yahweh do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. [ESV]” She was not swearing by the Moabite god, *Chemosh*, no, she had embraced as her own, her mother-in-law's God.

Naomi had been an unwitting evangelist. By her lived example, her daughter-in-law had come to value the relationship with Yahweh that Naomi had. Through all the trials and grief, her faith had pointed Ruth to the Lord and the choice to join herself to him and his people. Pray that in your life, family and friends may see the reality of your relationship with God and turn to him themselves. “Let your light so shine before people that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven.”<sup>2</sup> Don't use that, however, as an excuse never to speak of your faith.

Finally, Ruth promised that her covenant was lifelong. (*Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried*)

It was a brave decision. It would be far safer to go back to her family where father or brothers could protect her and provide a place for her. It would be more comfortable to go to her own known culture than this different one where she did not belong but would live as a foreigner.

When Ruth called on God to ensure she kept her covenant you used a standard covenant expression (*May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death separates you and me*). What does it mean?

The term for making a covenant was literally ‘cutting covenant’ because covenants in the Old Testament always involved the shedding of blood, usually the blood of a sacrifice.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:16

An animal would be killed as part of the sealing of the deal. And the “do so to me” was said indicating the dead animal. In other words, may God kill me if I break this covenant. Now, I don’t think Ruth stopped to kill animal on this journey, but she used the words derived from that custom to show she was utterly serious in her promise.

I said there is a theme of *hesed* – loving kindness and faithfulness in this book. With Ruth, it is writ large and plainly in action even though the word itself is not used here. Ruth is utterly committed and faithful to Naomi. Naomi would not be left destitute, Ruth would care for her until the end of her life. God had provided a daughter-in-law who was very precious in her loyalty and love. Later in the book, her behaviour is explicitly described as goodness and kindness (*hesed*).<sup>3</sup>

And so the two women wend their way on from Moab to Bethlehem and an uncertain future.

Had God shown *hesed* faithfulness and loving kindness? Naomi doubted it at that time. When she got back to Bethlehem after 10 years away, the women asked, “Is it really Naomi?”

She replied, Don’t call me Naomi (pleasant) call me Mara (bitter). For Almighty God has dealt me bitter blows. I went out full and the Lord has brought me home empty; why should you call me Naomi when the Lord has turned his back on me and sent such calamity!”

For her, life had been very tough. She was grieving and consumed with her losses. It is not surprising that she felt hard done by. But that does not mean the Lord had failed in his faithfulness and mercy. It is not the end of the story. Through our lives we too may find ourselves in tough times and can think that is the end.

But actually, Elimelech had made an unfaithful decision and had gone against the direction of the Lord. She was experiencing the consequences of that. At this point in the story she could not see the wood for the trees. She was up against hard feelings not knowing what would change very soon. And circumstances will change for her shortly – there is a subtle hint in the last verse of the chapter: “Their return from Moab and arrival in Bethlehem was at the beginning of the barley harvest.”

What is the point? As she has returned to her covenant God, to the House of Bread in the land called Fruitful, it is time for harvest. Elimelech had gone away from his portion and the result was loss. Yet through it all, God wove circumstances together for good. He had been faithful to Naomi and through her and these circumstances, there was an important development to come in the genealogy of the Messiah. Later in the story, Naomi will bless the Lord for his provision and for remembering them. At the end of this story, she will be satisfied. But more of that in the next weeks.

If you are out of God’s will, not following his calling for you, not walking in his promises, get back to the place he has called you to be. It is there that his purposes can again be fulfilled in your life.

When we are in hard circumstances, we may want to blame God. But we too need to remember that the story isn’t over yet.

We have to wait for next week to explore what unfolds but harvest time is coming...

I encourage you (even challenge) to make a point of reading this short book of the Bible during the week, to be ready for next week’s sermon.

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth 2:11-12 Boaz recognized her actions as goodness. Ruth 3:10 "This kindness (*hesed*) is greater than that which you showed earlier..." (i.e., to her mother-in-law)