

The Book of Ruth

Last week, I highlighted the verse from Jer 29:11, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” I sometimes wonder how the early explorers managed to traverse the Blue Mountains. Many explorers attempted to do that, only to be confronted by sandstone cliffs, dense bush and deep gorges which blocked their path. They had to turn back, possibly feeling frustrated and defeated. They were journeying into land, that for white settlers, was unchartered territory, so they did not know how they would be able to get across the mountains, let alone what land existed, on the other side of the Great Dividing Range. In the book of Ruth, one woman – Naomi – is attempting to forge a new life, while negotiating the multiple ‘brickwalls’ of widowhood, plus having no children or grandchildren to carry on the family name. She was a person who had lost ‘hope’, but had to learn, anew, that God had not forgotten or forsaken her or her family.

GETTING STARTED: What has been the hardest thing that you have had to deal with in your life?

READ: RUTH 4:1-21

- 🗨️ What did you notice/ what things stood out, as you just read the passage?
- 🗨️ What things did you take away from the sermon this week?
- 🗨️ What does it mean, for you, when you hear the comment, that we are to live our lives for God’s glory? And also, that we – and the characters in this book – are not the centre of the story. God is.

- ❗ This year, the song “*The Blessing*”¹ has been recorded by churches in many countries. It is drawn from the verses below. The verses in Numbers, are preceded by God telling Moses: “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites’” The priests were to verbalise God’s blessing and remind the people of it. In Deuteronomy, we read the reminder that God is faithful, characterised by *chesed*, a commitment to his covenant with his people. This is a ‘covenant of love’, where we experience his favour, grace and peace. In the midst of a year when people across the globe have experienced so much sickness, floods, fire, political turmoil and many other things, the words of this song reminds us that God wants us to experience his favour. It does not ensure that we will not experience tough times. It does remind us that, whatever happens, God is good.
The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)
Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. (Deut 7:9)

- 🗨️ Phil commented that, in Ruth 1, Naomi had lost sight of God’s goodness. She was bitter, disillusioned and on the verge of losing her faith. What have been times in your life, when you have doubted God’s faithfulness? What events led up to that? Was it a one-off event? Or was it the culmination of many years and many life experiences, that left you feeling bitter?

- ❗ Boaz had not made the first move to act as kinsman-redeemer for Naomi (and Elimelech’s line). In Ruth 3 and 4, it becomes obvious that, for him to do so, would have been inappropriate, because there was someone who had the first obligation to do so. As it was commonly known that Naomi had returned and had been widowed, some believe that when Boaz referred to this man as “my friend” (Ruth 4:1), there was an intentional action to not ‘name and shame’ this person. However, the fact that this man hadn’t gone out of his way to care for Naomi, was unacceptable.

“Boaz now publicly calls on the nearer redeemer to take on (lit., “you acquire”) the voluntary family or clan responsibility of marrying Ruth the Moabitess, in order (lit.) “to raise up the name¹⁷ of the deceased on his inherited estate [*nah^alâ*]” (4:5). In appealing to the nearer redeemer (*gō’ēl*) to raise up the name of the deceased, Boaz is not appealing to the letter of the law but its spirit. This is another manifestation of Boaz’s *hesed*. Neither man is legally bound by Deuteronomy 25:5–10 to marry Ruth; it is voluntary. But this does not erase all moral responsibility. As *gō’ēl*, Boaz, the reader knows, is prepared to do this. But what about this nearer *gō’ēl*?”²

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zp6ayqmvzM4>

² Younger, K. L., Jr. (2002). *Judges and Ruth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. p477.

☞ The negotiation at the city gate was one of those tricky, tough conversations that needed to be had, between two people who were related. It wasn't just about Boaz taking on Ruth as a wife. It was about confronting a relative, about not having done what was culturally expected of him. That there were ten elders of the city, as witnesses, meant that nothing could be misinterpreted or left to chance. How do you ensure that, when you have tough conversations, or where your message could be misconstrued, that people are clear about your intentions and your message? How do you do that in the workplace? How do you do that, in your family conversations?

☞ Read again the words of Ruth 4:11-12, which was the blessing that the elders of the city spoke over the lives of Boaz and Ruth. How often do you speak words of blessing over people that you do life with?

*Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, **may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.**"*

ⓘ Phil highlighted that there were a number of places in this book where we see God giving good gifts to Naomi: the commitment by Ruth to go with her (Ruth 1:16-17), the arrival of Boaz into their lives (Ruth 2:20), the gift of a child (Ruth 4:13, 16) and descendants who carried the blessings of God into the lives of future generations. (Ruth 4:17-21) In these verses, we see that the blessing pronounced by the city elders, was fulfilled – and meant that the family line of Perez continued.

☞ Through Scripture, we read of many women who experienced childlessness and were deemed to be 'barren'. Having children was seen to be a blessing by God. Yet, even in an era when we have different types of reproductive treatments which couples may be able to access if they are unable to conceive or carry a child to full term, childlessness remains an 'elephant in the room' that many couples find difficult to discuss. If you have – or are dealing with this issue – how do you feel about the idea – in Ruth 4:13 – that God enabled Ruth to conceive? Or even, thoughts that may be stated or unstated about this passage, that barrenness, must have been 'the woman's problem/ issue'?

ⓘ The women of the city acknowledged the goodness of God in her life (Ruth 4:14-15).
¹⁴ The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! ¹⁵ He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

☞ In James 1:17, we read: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." What are some of the things that you can thank God for, in your life? How often do you remind each other to be thankful?

ⓘ We can sometimes think that God has forgotten or is not interested in the minutiae of our lives. Yet, in Matt 10:29-31 and Matt 6:25-26, Jesus taught us that God is very interested in the lives of birds: providing for them and knowing their life-cycle. Jesus commented "Are you not much more valuable than they?" In Psalm 121, the psalmist challenges us to 'look up' to God for help, knowing that he is watching over our lives, including our 'coming and going'.
"I lift up my eyes to the mountains - where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. ... The Lord will keep you from all harm - he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore." (Ps 121:1-2,5-6)

FOR REFLECTION: Phil reminded us that the Christian life is not a straight-forward road.³ We will have trials, difficulties and disappointments. However, that does not mean that God is not sovereign. It does not mean that God is not good. It does not mean that God does not keep his promises. And it does not mean that, when we face roadblocks, that that is the end of our journey. Local historians tell us that, in 1813:

With the wisdom of a local (indigenous) guide who knew the well-worn paths, "The expedition crossed the mountains in three weeks, adopting the novel method of traversing the ridges instead of looking for a route through the valleys as previous explorers had done."⁴

Even when we despair and can't see a way to move forward, it does not mean we are at the 'end of the road'. What roadblocks are you facing in your life at the moment? Commit each of these issues to God.

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/ruth-the-best-is-yet-to-come>

⁴ <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/blue-mountains#:~:text=In%201813%20Gregory%20Blaxland%2C%20William,path%20across%20the%20Blue%20Mountains.>