

**FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH**  
**9244 Five Forks Road**  
**Waynesboro, PA 17268-9612**                      **Tel: (717) 762-2991**

---

**SCRIPTURE:** *Ruth 1*

**DATE:** *February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021*

**LOCATION:** *Auditorium (Bill)*

**SERMON:** *Afflicted, Empty, and Bitter*

---

*(Acknowledgement to Carolyn Custis James for her book, The Gospel of Ruth; and Philip DeCourcy for his podcast on the life of Ruth)*

Do you like to read, and if so, what kind of books are you drawn to? When you were a kid did you read ***Charlotte's Web*** or ***The Cat in the Hat?*** As adults, some of you may have read ***The Hobbit*** or ***The Chronicles of Narnia***.

A lot of us like to read, and a really good book will draw you in, and you'll find yourself identifying with the main character, or characters. They'll just take us along for the ride, through the ups and downs, the twists and turns...we root for this person and against that person...and the whole time we're fully aware that whatever is happening on this particular page, there is the potential for something completely unexpected to occur on the pages yet to come.

This morning we begin a sermon series called "**A Page Turner**". Are you familiar with the expression? It's a book that we find difficult to put down...it's getting late, we should go to bed...but the story is so captivating, we want to know what comes next, and so we just keep on turning the pages, one after the other.

You know, our lives – yours and mine – are like a book. There are pages already written, pages now being written, and pages yet to be written.

And while many of us would say that the story of our lives wouldn't be much of a page turner - after all, most of us live pretty ordinary lives – I think for those of you who are

following Jesus and joining in on the work He is doing...I think it's safe to say that you can look back on your life and recall faces and places that help you to see that your life's story has been a bit more interesting than you originally thought. More of a page turner than you thought.

I took the time to do this a while back, the people I've crossed paths with, the places I've been, the things that I've experienced since I started following Jesus...and there's a lot there. One page led to another and then to another...faces...places...events. And I'll bet many of you can say that same.

In the end, there is nothing better than being an active participant in the work that God is looking to do, and for the next 5 weeks we're going to be in the book of **Ruth** – and read about three active participants – **Naomi, Ruth and Boaz** – who are involved in the work that God is doing.

Ruth is a short book, only four chapters, and it's just ordinary life on ground level. There are no miracles per se, no angels, kings or prophets...in fact, God is only referred to several times throughout. But these three individuals -Naomi, Ruth and Boaz - will help you and I to see what happens when **God's Purpose and Human Decisions** are aligned together.

Go ahead and open up your Bible, get out your device, or follow along on the screen as we turn our attention to the book of Ruth, this morning looking specifically at the first chapter.

This morning's message is titled, **Afflicted, Empty, and Bitter**.

We're going to begin by watching a short video sketch that gives us an overview of **What's Happening** in Chapter 1. Then we'll look at a few **What We Don't Want to Miss.**"

What's happening in Chapter 1 that might lead God to say: "Slow down, and think about this"? And finally, I'll be asking you, **What's Your Next Step?** What is the next step that God is asking you to take...could it be something that might make up a pretty important page in your life's story?

First, let's make sure we understand...

## 1. WHAT'S HAPPENING

...here in the first chapter of Ruth. Let's watch this short sketch which will give us a nice overview of the chapter.

### VIDEO

Tragedy and death is how the book of Ruth begins.

Let's talk than about...

## 2. WHAT WE DON'T WANT TO MISS

The first thing I think we should do is try to grasp the extent of...

### A. Naomi's Pain

Carolyn Custis James has written a book called ***The Gospel of Ruth***, and she has great insight and her book has been a valuable resource for me in preparing these messages. James points out that a lot of movies and books have what we call surprise endings...the book of Ruth has a surprise beginning, as all the male characters are removed from the story within the **first five verses**, *...and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. Ruth 1:5b*.

Five short verses, and yet the truth is that Naomi's pain unfolds over the course of a decade. She has been called "a female Job", who also experienced great loss, including the loss of his children.

Naomi's suffering actually began back in Bethlehem with the onset of **the famine**. (*...there was a famine in the land. 1:1b*) Let's be honest...when you and I read the word famine in the Bible – and it appears at various times – it doesn't really stir us, we don't feel it...and I suppose that's because we've never experienced it.

What's the longest that you can remember ever going without food? I've intentionally fasted for a day at different times throughout my life, but never more than a day.

We'll say, *"I'm starving"* when we haven't eaten in the last four hours, but we have no idea what it's like to watch a son or a daughter die before our eyes because there is simply no food to be found.

Because of this famine that was going on in Judah, Elimelech decides to leave Bethlehem and go live in **the land of Moab to the east**. This would seem to an unwise choice, as the Moabites are ancient enemies of the Israelites.

The Moabites come from an incestuous encounter between Lot and his oldest daughter (Genesis 19). The son that was born out of this was named Moab, and his descendants - the Moabites worship pagan gods and practice child sacrifice among other things.

And what do you think Naomi was saying to God as she walked with her husband and two boys along the dusty road leading to Moab? *"So that was to be the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey? We were to be Your chosen people? Where is Your compassion, Your concern, Your care?"*

Then she and her family arrive in **Moab**. *(And they went to Moab... 1:2b)* What kind of reception do you think they got? What kind of reception do most immigrants/foreigners get upon entering into a different culture? As I said, there was long standing tension between the Israelites and Moabites, and so I'm sure they weren't met with open arms.

And once there, the dying begins. First, it was her husband, *(Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died... 1:3b)* and suddenly, Naomi finds herself raising two sons as a single parent. What do you think Naomi was saying to God at this point? Her circumstances would have been incredibly challenging in any culture, but especially so in a hostile, foreign land.

Now it's important to know that Naomi came from a culture where a woman's value was measured by... what?

By how many sons she could produce. And Naomi had done well, producing not one but two sons...sons that would carry on the family name and care for her when she grew old. These two sons - in spite of God's commands, took two women from Moab – Orpah and

Ruth – as their wives. The hope was that these marriages would produce more sons...but neither Orpah or Ruth were able to conceive. And unless a son or sons could be produced, the line of Elimelech would cease to exist beyond Naomi's two sons.

And then the unthinkable happens, the premature death of both of her sons. (*...both Mahlon and Kilion also died... 1:5a*). ...which also meant the death of Naomi's future. What does a conversation with God look like when hardship, such as a famine...gives way to tragedy, and then more tragedy?

Some of you may be familiar with **Elie Wiesel**, who as a teenage boy survived the concentration camp, survived the holocaust and emerged still convinced of the existence of God, but having lost any hope in the goodness of God. He wrote, ***“Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”***

Naomi remains convinced of the existence of God, but she no longer believes that He is for her, that He will bless her...and she lays the blame for her pain at God's feet.

At some point, after spending at least 10 years in Moab, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, and she does so, with Ruth by her side. It's interesting, it says,...

**Ruth 1:19b When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them...**

The whole town was “stirred.” In the original language, it implies the town was in an uproar, that the people were greatly agitated. Was it because they were first hearing of the deaths of Elimelech and his two sons? Was it because of this Moabitess, not yet aware of her remarkable loyalty? Or could it be perhaps because of Naomi's appearance?

After a 10 year absence, the words that any of us would want to hear would be, “Oh, my, you haven't changed a bit!” This wasn't what Naomi heard, though...not even close. They said: **“Can this be Naomi?” (1:19b)**

They say that there are certain things that can weather the skin...the sun...alcoholism. I believe suffering can as well. What did they see different with Naomi? Dark circles...deep creases...sagging shoulders...

Remember me saying earlier that Naomi is seen as a female Job. Maybe you're familiar with the reaction Job got from three of his friends: *"When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him...they began to weep aloud...and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads...no one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was."* (Job 2:12-13)

*"Don't call me Naomi...call me Mara...because **The Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but The LORD has brought me back empty...The LORD has afflicted me...The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.**"*

She doesn't doubt God's existence...but she is convinced that God has turned His back on her, and is behind all that has happened.

Naomi's pain and her reaction...raw, and brutally honest...is something that God doesn't want us to miss. He wants us to feel it and try to understand it as best we can. Because this raw, brutal honesty is what He will want from us if and when we become convinced that He has turned His back on us. More about that in just a few.

First though, one more place in this chapter where I believe God is saying *"Slow down... and think about this"*... It occurs...

## **B. Somewhere Along the Road**

Now we're going to backtrack a little, and go back to somewhere along the road between Moab and Bethlehem. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are headed to Bethlehem, and while we don't know exactly where this was, at one point Naomi suddenly comes to a halt. And in her book, James writes,

***"If I had my way, there would be a large stone "X" embedded in the middle of the road that runs between Moab and Bethlehem to mark the spot where Naomi stops to send her daughters-in-law back to Moab. The choices made on this historic spot***

*will not only shape the very souls of all three women, they will alter the course of Israel's history and advance the redemptive purposes of God."*

It begins with Naomi going against her own self-interests and setting her daughters-in-law free. They are duty bound to go back to Bethlehem with her, but Naomi understands that her future and their future is bleak, and so in an act of compassion...

**Ruth 1:8 ...Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home."**

She then adds a blessing, asking for the Lord to show them kindness and rest in the home of a future husband. And as the three of them cling to each other and begin to weep aloud, Orpah and Ruth insist that they will continue on the road with her.

Naomi doesn't give up easily, and she begins to paint a picture of how bleak things would be if they were to continue on, "There is no future for any of us in Bethlehem, and here's why"...and it just reaches a point for Naomi where it all comes pouring out...

**Ruth 1:13b "...the LORD's hand has gone out against me!"**

And they continue to weep.

At this point, the reality of the situation appears to have struck a chord with Orpah, she will accept the freedom that Naomi is offering, and return home. This is not a selfish decision, in fact it seems pretty sensible, doesn't it? Think about if you were there and had to decide. You know that lies ahead in Bethlehem, and it's not much. You know what lies behind in Moab, and that would be the family and the familiar. Orpah ends making the decision that many of us probably would have made, it was sensible...and she returns home with Naomi's blessing.

What her decision does however, is shine a light on the incredible loyalty and commitment that Ruth shows for Naomi, as she remains standing there. And so Naomi resorts to a bit of peer pressure:

**Ruth 1:15 “Look...your sister-in-law is going back to her people and to her gods. Go back with her.”**

Throughout the course of everyday life, there are hard choices and difficult decisions to be made, and this sure is one of them. But it's interesting, it's at this moment when Naomi speaks about not only returning back to her people, but also to her gods, that Ruth finds her voice. For Ruth, this decision isn't just about land, or loyalty to her mother-in-law or about whatever the future holds. It's about God. She says to Naomi...

**Ruth 1:16 “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”**

This is incredible. Just moments before, Naomi, in deep despair cries out how “**...the LORD's hand has gone out against me!**” Ruth's response: “**Your God will be my God.**”

Really? The God who has seemingly brought about so much pain in Naomi's life? What would cause Ruth to make such a choice?

Custis James writes, “***Somewhere along the road to Bethlehem, God closes in on Ruth.***”

I spoke back at the beginning of God's will, God's plan, God's purpose...and also our choices and our decision making. And it's impossible to know how it all comes together...but here is God closing in on Ruth...and here is Ruth with some awareness of Naomi's God, along with an awareness of a choice that needs to be made. And she chooses to not only embrace Naomi, but Naomi's God as well.

And so the two of them gather up their bundles and resume their journey. Despair and hope traveling side by side.

Up ahead lay the little town of Bethlehem. Little did the people of that town know they were about to be stirred, awakened from their deep and dreamless sleep...that the decision made somewhere on the road between their town and Moab would alter the course of Israel's history.

God has a plan, He has a purpose...we have free will when it comes to hard choices and difficult decisions. It's a beautiful thing when it all comes together.

So...

### **3. WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?**

In what way has God spoken to you, and what step is He inviting you to take?

Earlier I said that Naomi's brutal honesty in the midst of her pain is one thing that God doesn't want us to miss. And that's because for some, the next step you might need to take is to **Become brutally honest with God.**

In her book, James writes about the day the towers fell...it was 9/11, and a friend of hers was gathered with coworkers in their office, watching on a tv screen as this tragedy unfolded. Those who worked with her knew of her faith in God, because she had been open about it. As the second tower fell, a man standing next to her simply said, ***"So much for your God."***

Whenever tragedy strikes, the inevitable question always is, **"Where was your God?"** I like how James addresses this:

***"It's a fair question whether we like it or not. And I'm not sure how to answer it. It doesn't cause me to doubt God's existence, but it does force me to admit there is much about God that I don't understand. To simply say, 'His ways are not our ways' doesn't ultimately satisfy or soothe a wounded heart."***

She goes on to say that when our world seems to be falling apart, and something or someone precious is at stake, it can be frightening when God doesn't show up to hold things together even as we're begging Him to come.

She says that Christians are great pretenders. We try to smooth things over for God and polish up and protect His reputation. We feel it's our Christian duty to keep a stiff upper lip in order to prove to the world – and to each other – that the Christian life really works.

James writes, **“God doesn’t and won’t participate in this kind of masquerade. If the Bible tells us anything, it is that this world is fraught with perils and hardships.”**

The story of Naomi as well as the story of Job, and so many others bring to the surface disturbing questions about what God is doing...what is His will, His plan, His purpose in all of this?

And an honest reading of the Bible shows that God often doesn’t explain Himself. Both Job and Naomi went to their graves with a lot of questions unanswered and the pain over those that they lost still aching in their hearts.

Here’s the thing...through it all, they were able to gain a deeper level of trust in Him, and so the next step for some of you...those of you who find yourself in the midst of deep pain...you don’t need to protect God’s reputation and by trying to cover up your pain. You are free to wrestle with God with the same brutal honesty as Naomi...yet knowing that God may not give you the answers you’re looking for.

But He won’t turn you away...He’ll take anything you want to throw at Him...and if your next step is to begin to wrestle with Him, my hope is that by doing so, when it’s all over, you will somehow come away with a deeper level of trust in Him.

One more possibility when it comes to your next step...this morning presents an opportunity for some of us to **Choose God**. I talked about that spot on the road where Ruth was faced with a hard choice: Return to the familiar, or continue on with Naomi. She ended up not only choosing Naomi, but even more significantly, she chose God.

Maybe you didn’t sit down this morning or tune in this morning expecting the unexpected to occur. But I wonder if some of you might be sensing that God has placed a big “x” on the spot where you’re sitting or standing, because you’ve arrived at a time and a place where you need to make a choice...what you might feel is a difficult decision.

To return to the familiar, or to choose God. For some, choosing God means that here and now, you make the decision to follow Jesus. You join us as we listen to what He taught and watch how He lived, and we put what He teaches and how He lived into practice in our

own lives. He's inviting you to begin to actively follow Him...and really, this is what you and I were made for.

For some, maybe your decision isn't about choosing God, you would say you've already done that. Maybe the spot you're on - the choice you have to make - is about whether or not you're going to take your choice seriously.

I stood on **that spot**, back in 1988...28 years old. I could rightly say I had already chosen God because I had prayed a prayer, asking Jesus to be my Savior 6 years earlier, in 1982. But you might say I had one foot in Bethlehem, and one foot in Moab.

I was coming to church, somewhat active in the church, even giving my tithe...but I was also not willing to let go of certain habits – some will refer to them as recreational drugs – that had become a welcome and familiar part of my life.

By 1988 I had fallen in love with Karen, and knew that she was the first person I ever could see myself spending the rest of my life with. And so came this one very painful night where it became obvious that I had a choice to make. It was a choice I had been avoiding, but it all came down to returning to the familiar, or leaving that world behind and continuing on with Karen.

I chose Karen, of course, walking away from what was familiar. But I knew that by continuing to run in that world, I would never be the husband I was called to be...the dad I would be called to be...would never be the pastor, the friend that God was calling me to be.

Here's the thing...I didn't just choose Karen...it was at that time that I also chose God, we both did, and this time we were serious about it. We both looked at our lives and knew we were casually going through the motions...coming to church, serving, giving our tithe...but His will, His plan, His purpose for our lives wasn't a factor when it came to our choices and our decision-making.

In 1988 we stood at this place on the road, and said it was time to go all-in with each other, and all-in with God. We've been far from perfect since then, but we've never looked back.

I tell you this because there may be some of you in here or out there, and even though you believe in Jesus, you've been pretty casual with it...just going through the motions. Look down, see where you're sitting or standing, is it possible that God has placed an "X" on that spot, and is inviting you to start walking with Him?

How did James put it in her book? Something like this...

***The choices made on this historic spot will not only shape ~~the very souls of all three women~~ your very soul, they will alter the course of Israel's your history and advance the redemptive purposes of God.***

Is today the time to turn the page and start of a new chapter in your life? God is inviting you to join Him and become actively involved in the work He is looking to do in your life...and in this church...and in this community. You say how do I begin?

Perhaps by starting to put into practice those things that Pastor Shaun has been sharing with us...daily moments of **silence and solitude**, giving God a chance to speak...observing a weekly **Sabbath**, making sure you are getting rest and refreshment and drawing closer to God...looking for ways to **simplify life**. This is the example set by Jesus, and this is some of what it looks like to follow Him.

Maybe you weren't really expecting this when your day began...but that's how books are written and how life unfolds. Following Jesus and playing a part in the work that God is doing is simply the best feeling in the world...there is absolutely nothing that compares to it, and I hope everyone in here and out there will experience that first hand.

I'd like to invite any of you to continue on a conversation about any of this, feel free to call me or email me and I'd love to engage with you about the story of your life and the steps you feel God is asking you to take.

Okay...when we come back next week, we'll pick up where we left off. Naomi afflicted, empty and bitter with Ruth by her side...

**Ruth 1:22b "...as the barley harvest was beginning."**

## Prayer