

Always and Forever Love

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Date: 08 July 2018

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[0 : 0 0] you this morning to bring God's Word. As many of you have probably figured out at this point, I am not Joel Smith, and we are not going to be in the Gospel of Mark. So we are going to be back in in the book of Ruth. We're starting back in Ruth, Ruth chapter 1, verse 6. And as we come to this passage and I think of the circumstances of this week, I'm reminded of something that can happen sometimes when someone is getting ordained. As many of you know, I recently went through the trials of ordination, and part of that involves going forward in front of all the pastors in, for me, Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming, and allowing them to ask whatever questions they want.

And I knew going in, and thankfully this didn't happen, but that someone might try to ask me a question to trip me up. And one of the most famous ones is this. When you get to the church history section, you'll have an older pastor get up, and he'll raise his hand, and he'll say, who was the head of the church in the fifth century?

And the hope is that the candidate does not begin ringing through his brain to try to remember who exactly was in charge in the first century. Because the answer in the fifth century is the same as the 21st. The head of the church is the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And so he is our shepherd, whether we have a senior pastor candidate or not. He's always leading and providing and guiding for his church. Last week we looked at Ruth chapter one, and we asked a big question. Is God still the king when tragedy strikes? We could ask the question ourselves of this week, is God still the king when we thought that there wasn't mold in our church? But there was. And is God still the king when we thought that we had a new senior pastor and we don't? And the answer this week is the same as last week. Yes. God is still the king. He's still leading and guiding and providing for his people.

And so we're right back in Ruth chapter one. Remember that Ruth is a book about suffering. That God, as a wise and loving father, wants to tell us what it's like. He wants to prepare us for real life in this world. And so he does that both for those who are suffering and those who are not.

For those who are suffering, this book is a book, remember, about widows, which is many of us. And it's a book about those who live in a country where they weren't born, which is also many of us.

[2 : 5 1] And it's also a book for people who live in a world that is broken and bleeding from sin. And so that's all of us here this morning. Remember that I reminded us that if we're not suffering, this book is a reminder for us that we will one day if we live long enough in this world.

And if we're not suffering, it's also a reminder for us that there are many around us right now. We just have to look around the room who are. And so God has given us his word to provide for us because he hasn't left us alone.

Like a good father, he's coming to speak to us in words that we can understand. We're going to be in Ruth chapter one, looking at verses six through 18. Remember that this is God's word.

And God tells us that his word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold. And it is sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb.

And so we're going to turn to it now. We're in Ruth chapter one, starting in verse six through verse 18. Then she arose, that's Naomi, with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab.

[4 : 09] For she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

Verse nine. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, No, we will return with you to your people.

But Naomi said, Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters.

Go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown?

[5 : 18] Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Verse 15.

And she said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law. But Ruth said, Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you.

For where you go, I will go. And where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also, if anything but death parts me from you.

[6 : 25] And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. Please pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Dear Father in heaven, we thank you that you have a word that brings dead things to life.

And so we ask that you would do that this morning. That you would use your word to bring us to life. That you'd show us yourself.

And that you would cast a spotlight on Jesus Christ. So that we could see him as more beautiful and more glorious than anything else. We ask all these things in his name.

Amen. If you were following the commentators and the pundits a couple years ago, I think it was somewhere in 2016, there was a columnist who had what she believed was a brilliant idea.

And many others picked up on this idea and started commenting it on themselves, wondering if it would be a great solution to a problem. And her suggestion was this.

[7 : 41] Why don't we treat our marriages more like car leases? Why don't we have term marriages? Why don't we have a 10-year marriage?

And then after the 10 years, a couple can reconsider whether they want to stay married. In the minds of this columnist, this was going to solve many of the problems that people face today.

Because they could decide after 10 years whether they were still fulfilled. Whether they were still getting what they want out of the commitments they made.

And it highlights something that all of us know, which is that commitment is hard. And it involves suffering. And it highlights a temptation that each of us face as well.

That when the going gets hard, it's easier to go than to stay. When the going gets hard, it's easier to go than to stay.

[8 : 50] And so, what is a commitment worth if it's only for the good times? What is a commitment worth if it's only for when you're fulfilled and not for when you have to sacrifice?

That's a question we're going to see in this passage before us. Remember that we'd seen last week that Ruth and Naomi had faced tremendous, tremendous suffering. What was for Ruth, excuse me, for Naomi, a foreign country.

And so they had heard in verse 6 that the Lord had visited his people back in their homeland of Israel. And so they were on their way back, on the journey back.

And for whatever reason, Naomi and her two daughter-in-laws accompany her. Remember, she has both Ruth and Orpah. Judah, and they're going back with her.

And we see this in verse 7. So they set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And then Naomi reveals something to us that we hadn't known about her character.

[10 : 01] And that is that she would have made an excellent lawyer. Because Naomi decides she is going to present an irrefutable, an inescapable, watertight case for why Orpah and Ruth should go back.

Did you notice what the most repeated words were here in this passage? It's go, go back, return. And it's Naomi over and over telling her daughter-in-laws why they should not stay with her.

And the argument actually makes sense. because there's nothing they have to gain by sticking with Naomi. She blesses them in verse 8.

May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with me in the dead. And she acknowledges in verse 9 that just like her, they are widows as well. And so their best chance of remarriage is going to be going back to their home country.

That's going to be the place where they're going to find what she calls in verse 9, rest. And of course they protest in verse 10, no, we're going to stay with you. Maybe some of this is their emotion still from the suffering that they've gone through together.

[11 : 20] Maybe some of it's out of politeness, but they're not willing to give up too easily. And so she just keeps arguing. She says in verse 11, I can't give you any sons. And even if I were to have a son now, would you wait all the way until they grew up?

Would you wait that long to be fulfilled? Would you wait that long to get what you need? No. And then in 13, she lays down the hammer.

For it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. In other words, if you stay with me, the Lord's curse that has fallen on me is going to fall on you as well.

We'll talk more about Naomi and her interpretation of events next week. But here, in terms of the daughters-in-law, we can see that she has delivered an excellent case.

There is nothing wrong with Naomi's argument. And then Orpah realizes that. In some ways, Orpah's the sensible character here. She makes a decision that she can defend, that Naomi can defend, that makes sense for her to return back to her own country and her own people.

[12 : 39] But it says in verse 14 that Ruth does something very different. Did you catch the word that's used? It says, she clung to her. The word clung here is the same word that shows up in Genesis chapter 2 when the author of Genesis is telling us what should happen between a husband and a wife if they cling to each other.

And so it's not just telling us that Ruth is giving Naomi a hug. but it's telling us that no matter what, in spite of all the arguments, she is going to stick with her.

She is going to stay with her mother-in-law no matter what. And she's going to stay with her not because of anything she, it seems, has to gain.

It says, for where you will go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried.

May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything else but death parts me from you. Now, in the ancient Near East when you took an oath, you took an oath in the name not of someone else's God but of your God.

[14 : 01] And so here, Ruth is saying, I am embracing not just you but I am embracing the true God. Orpah can go back to the Baals and Chemosh, the false gods that were found in Moab but I'm going to be with you and I'm going to accept your God.

Why does she do it? What does she know about the Lord? It's hidden a little bit but it's all the way back in verse 8.

Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

And we skip over it in our English translations because the word kindly here only begins to express what's going on here. This is the word in Hebrew that's called hesed.

It's a description of the type of love that God has. And it's such an overwhelming kind of love that it's hard even to begin to give a definition of it.

[15 : 25] I read recently someone trying to define this hesed love and they gave ten bullet points with multiple sentences to try to explain what type of love this is. And so what do you do when you come against an overwhelming definition?

Well, if you're a teacher, you know. You find something written for children. And so the best definition I can give you of hesed love comes from the academic volume known as the Jesus Storybook Bible.

And it describes hesed love in this way. It is God's never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.

It is God's never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love. So let's read verse 8 again. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house.

May the Lord show you his never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love, as you have shown to the dead and to me.

[16 : 42] So why does Ruth here convert? Why does she claim this Lord as her Lord? Because she knows the kind of Lord he is.

And she knows the kind of love that he has for his people. She knows that he has a never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.

But she doesn't just know that for herself. It's because of that that she shows the exact same love, the very same love to Naomi.

It's because for whatever reason, living with this Israelite family, married to an Israelite husband, somehow, in some way, Ruth has learned about the ways of the Lord.

And so she is not willing to give up even against the best arguments. arguments. She's not willing to give up even against the best arguments.

[17 : 55] But she doesn't just commit to Naomi. Excuse me, she doesn't just commit to the Lord. She commits to Naomi as well. Because she understands that a commitment to follow this Lord, this Lord of never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love, means that as she receives that love, she shows the same love to others.

And so the love that she understands comes from the Lord, she is now showing to Naomi. She's committing. I began by asking about highlighting the difference between love that is focused on self-fulfillment, love that leaves when the going gets hard, and love that is on self-sacrifice.

And it would be hard to find a better example in the Bible than this, of love that is self-sacrificing rather than seeking self-fulfillment.

And so as we're talking about suffering together, as we're trying to say something about suffering, knowing that we cannot say everything, Ruth shows us that faith means commit to those who suffer, even when we have nothing to gain.

Faith means that we commit to those who suffer, even when we have nothing to gain. Now, walking with those who suffer involves sacrifice.

[19 : 34] And walking with those who suffer means that we will suffer as well. Walking with those who suffer involves sacrifice and it means that we will suffer as well.

And yet we do it. We're able and willing to show never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love, because we serve a God who has done that for us.

That's what Ruth is doing here for Naomi. me. And so a commitment to the Lord is a commitment, first of all, to a Savior who has suffered, but it's also a commitment to people who suffer.

Remember I said that you're surrounded by people in this room who are suffering, even if you're not. And so all you have to do is look around and see people who need your commitment and your love and your care.

remember that this is a book about widows. And part of God's chesed love throughout the Old Testament is his commitment to the widow, because they are the most vulnerable.

[20 : 50] And so there's many applications that we could draw from this passage. We could draw those that are general and those that are broad. The most specific would be, though, this very thing, the care for the widow that God cares so much about.

the care for the widow that God cares so much about. We could extend it to anyone who is experiencing tremendous loss and those who have suffered, that God's family is for them not just a pie-in-the-sky hope, but it's the kind of hope that has flesh and blood.

I've been so encouraged by all of you. it's not a coincidence that this past week as I was preparing to teach and try to understand this passage that not once but twice, without even trying to, accidentally, I found out about several of you who week in, week out, day in, day out, have committed to caring for those in our church who are suffering, those in our church who are experiencing loss.

and I found this out not necessarily because those who suffer told me, excuse me, not because those who are caring told me, but because I heard about it from those who are suffering. And so, brothers and sisters, I'm so encouraged by you and the ways that you are doing exactly this.

And so, let's, as Paul encourages, stir that up more and more to remember, as those who have lost someone will tell us, often it feels like they're allowed one week or one month to grieve.

[22 : 32] And then, suddenly, everything's supposed to be normal again. And yet, you know, if you've walked that path, that it's something that lasts for years. It's something that happens on anniversaries.

Something that happens on holidays. It's something that requires this kind of love for us to come alongside of each other, to show each other unbreaking, never stopping, never giving up kind of love.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying we don't have boundaries. Ruth committed to one widow. She didn't commit to every widow. And in fact, Jesus makes the same point in Luke.

He says that Elijah could have, in the Old Testament, remember, Elijah came and helped a widow. He could have gone to so many widows, but he chose one. So, I'm not saying don't have boundaries.

I'm not saying you're not a limited human being with limited resources, but I am saying come alongside.

[23 : 36] Come alongside of each other. Let's come alongside of each other, not for a week, not for a month, but the rest of the time we're here together. I'll give you a few practical suggestions that folks have shared with me about things that are helpful.

people. If you know someone and their spouse or someone else passes away and dies, mark that on your calendar for the next year. Put a reminder on your phone for every year when that date comes around.

Send them a text. Don't say, call me if you need anything. Make the call. Hey, would you like to come over and join us for dinner?

Hey, I'm going shopping. Can you come with me? I bet when you showed up this morning you weren't hoping to hear about going shopping with someone. So you hear from the pulpit.

That is part of the Christian life. Inviting people to go shopping with you and over to your house for dinner is part of the Christian life. And so as we're walking through as a congregation together talking about what it is like to suffer, we're not just speaking to those who are suffering and have suffered, but to all of us.

[24 : 56] That we would become wise. Wise not just to prepare for the suffering that we face and not just to prepare for the suffering that we will face, but to be wise to know how to care and love for each other.

It was Jim Franks who said this morning that the one another passages are especially important. And what he was talking about is the passages where Paul says, love one another as Christ has loved you.

And so we see then that there is an answer to the self-fulfillment view of relationships. There's an answer to the ten-year marriage.

The ten-year commitment. And it's the self-sacrificial view of relationships. There are all sorts of examples that I could give you.

The one that stands out in my mind is about a man that I think many of you actually may have heard of. His name is Robertson McQuilkin. And in the late 1970s, early 1980s, he realized that his wife was not able to remember quite as much as she had been able to remember before.

[26 : 14] And slowly, little by little, she wasn't able to do as much as she'd been able to do before. He was the president of a prominent and flourishing college and university.

He had tremendous success before him in his past that he could point to, and tremendous success ahead of him. And he began to talk with the board of trustees about what it would look like for him to step down and care for his wife.

In 1990, Christianity Today ran an article about his decision that year to step down to begin becoming the full caretaker for his wife. And in 1996, they ran a follow-up article because there had been so much response to the sacrifices that he had made.

He was featured on Family Life Today in a four-part series, and then after his wife passed away in 2004, Christianity Today came back and did a final interview with him. Because this was a man who had friends all around him saying, you don't need to do this.

She won't know the difference. And you have a successful career still ahead of you. You're still in your 50s. You still have so much to do.

[27 : 29] And yet Robertson McQuilkin chose self-sacrifice over self-fulfillment. And in that, people again and again, he wrote a book actually, if you want to learn more, I wish I could tell you more and more about him this morning if we had time.

He wrote a book called A Promise Kept, if you're interested and you can find all sorts of things about him on the internet. But in the final interview that Christianity Today did with him in 2004, they asked him this question.

What did caring for your wife teach you about the Christian life? He said this, I would love her, but she could not love me back.

And that is a painful thing. As I was leaning over her one day, I thought, Lord, is that the way it is between you and me?

You pouring out your love and care so consciously, and what do you get back? A brief salute in the morning, we connect, grumbling when I don't get what I want, when you don't do it the way I like.

[28 : 34] How sad. Sad for him. Do you hear what he said at the beginning? I would love her, but she couldn't love me back.

And that is a painful thing. Brothers and sisters, it is in Romans chapter 5, verse 8, that Paul tells us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

When there was nothing that he could gain, when he could not be fulfilled, he chose for us an act not of self-fulfillment, but of self-sacrifice, so that he could show us never giving up, never stopping, unbreaking, always and forever love.

And so, because Christ has suffered with and for us, we can join, commit to, and walk with those who have suffered.

Lord, please pray with me. Dear Father in Heaven, we thank you that you are a suffering Savior, that you've suffered for us, and that you, even when we have nothing to give you, even when we're dead in our sins, you come to us with never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.

[30 : 06] we ask that you would remind us of that this morning, that you'd pour your spirit into our hearts to be able to do what we could not do without you, and that is to walk here, like Ruth, with Naomi, with those who suffer, that we would be able to show to others the same love that you have shown to us.

We ask all these things in the name of your Son. Amen.