

When Tragedy Strikes

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[0 : 00] it's my joy to be with you all again to bring God's word to you we're going to be starting a new sermon series in the book of Ruth and that's all I'm going to say at this moment before I introduce the book I want to start with a question this question is specifically for the kids among us now this is a silent question so I'm just asking you to think you don't have to say anything out loud but my question is this why do your parents read out loud to you why do your parents read out loud to you why do they take time sometimes to share stories with you some that are old from their own childhood and some perhaps that are new that they didn't know when they were your age there's a lot of different answers we could think of perhaps some of it's just the joy of being together and sharing a quiet time outside of all the rush of life perhaps some of it's the excitement that we get from the idea of a journey and a challenge but I hope among all of that there's another reason as well and it's true both for children and adults who read stories and it's this that when we read a story we get to experience things that we ourselves have never done and especially when we're young it's an opportunity for us to learn about places and people and things that otherwise we wouldn't know about and most importantly it's a chance for us to become wise that as your parents read stories to you they're hoping that as you hear about the mistakes of a character you are learning without having to suffer the consequences yourselves and that as you read about their successes you are able to see the result of things like hard work and perseverance and so it's out of your parents love for you that they want you to become wise wiser than your years that they read stories to you now we as adults often read stories for the same reason it's important for us to know things about people and cultures that we would not otherwise encounter but as we grow we sometimes read stories not to know about people who've experienced things differently than us but to read about people who've experienced the same thing so that we know as we go through something in life that we're not alone we're not the only person who has seen or done or heard the things that we've gone through in our lives as we come to the book of ruth someone asked me recently why is it that we're studying the book of ruth and it's for those same reasons the book of ruth is going to touch on suffering and so there's some of us in this room who have not experienced a lot of suffering in our lives and there's some of us who have it's a book about widows it's going to be a book about two widows in particular and there are many among us here today who are widows it's a book about people who have to live in a place that they weren't born and there's many here this morning who live in a place where they were not born and it's a book about suffering and there's many of us who have not experienced the things that we encounter in this book but it's a book for everyone who lives in a world that is broken and bleeding from the results of sin and so that is all of us here and so god like a good and gracious father or mother wants those of us who have walked through suffering to know that we're not the only ones and he wants those of us who have not walked through the kind of suffering that we'll see in this book to learn and become wise if you've not suffered the things that we're going to talk about this morning and in the book of ruth

there are two things we need to keep in mind one if we're not suffering now we're surrounded by people who are that all you need to do is look around the room and you can see people and faces here among us who have walked through incredibly difficult things and are walking through some of them right now and the other thing to keep in mind is that if you're not suffering right now if the lord gives you the grace to live long enough one day you will and so god like a loving father wants to prepare us he wants us to know and understand and be prepared for the things that come along in our lives and so like a loving father or a loving mother he wants to tell us a story and so we're going to see that as we come to the book of ruth i'm going to say two other things as we we start first of all as we're talking about suffering it's something that's incredibly complicated complex and it's incredibly messy and so i am not going to say everything about suffering this morning if we were to say everything that could be said we would be here into the afternoon we would skip the announcement from the pulpit search committee and we would be here into the evening and then we would have to come back again on monday morning to continue and so i'm not going to say everything but we will just begin and say something not everything but something second i know that as we talk about some of these things those of us who have walked through them it will bring up memories for us and so i want to remind you as i have before that most importantly as that happens the lord is for you and he is with you and of much less importance i am for you and with you as well and so with that we're going to turn to the book of ruth we're starting in ruth chapter 1 at verse 1 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 read it now starting in verse 1 in the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land and a man of bethlehem in judah went to sojourn in the country of moab he and his wife and his two sons the name of the man was a limeleck and the name of his wife naomi and the names of his two sons were malin and chilian they were aetherophytes from bethlehem in judah they went into the country of moab and remained there verse 3 but a limeleck the husband of naomi died and she was left with her two sons these took moabite wives the name of the one was orpah and the name of the other ruth they lived there about 10 years and both malin and chilian died so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband verse 6 then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of moab for she had heard in the fields of moab that the lord had visited his people and given them food please pray with me as we come to this portion of god's word dear father in heaven we thank you that you are a loving father that you want to teach us and instruct us you want us to become wise you want to comfort us and encourage us and you need to challenge us so we ask that you would do all of those things for us this morning that you would send your holy spirit among us so that our eyes would be opened our ears unstopped our minds clear and our hearts would be softened so that we would see and hear and believe everything that is written about you in your word amen

when i had first graduated from college had a few months off because i of course had the summer break but i quickly got a job teaching at a small school in eastern virginia and one of the first people i met as i began teaching there was a woman whose name was alice chidzero alice had had a very long history in her life she was originally from zimbabwe she had grown up in the british colony of rudicia during the time when the freedom fighters were fighting for them to be free and fully become part of zimbabwe and i didn't know her whole story but i knew enough to know that she was a woman who had suffered tremendously and as i started at the school she was the one who told me on my first day or second day of helping with the car line that i was 22 fresh out of college in her words a kidult which i wore with honor and as a badge of honor in some ways as i began to know a little bit more about alice and her story and she would share sometimes in our chapel services at school and she would tell dramatic stories about the way that god had provided for her and his faithfulness to her and this past january many of alice's students she had taught at the school for a while encouraged her over and over again that she had to write a book to tell her story and so she didn't consider herself a writer but after a lot of trepidation and work and struggle she finally did and so i was able to get a hold of a copy of her book called when the brook runs dry my journey from africa to america and back a few times just came out this january and i've been reading it as i prepared for this sermon series and alice goes through many of the things that we learn just in these first five verses about ruth and naomi and yet she spends a whole book going through them her experiences and the things that she felt as she walked through times of tremendous difficulty and so i'm just going to read you a few quotes as we begin first of all alice suffers the death of her father and her young daughter her young daughter has a blood infusion that goes terribly wrong and so as she thinks through both of those she says this the nightmare just seemed to be growing bleaker everything around me felt black there were no grays later on alice is going to travel all the way from zimbabwe to the united states which is where i met her long before i met her though while she was in the united states her husband developed a tumor in his brain and he was given only six months to live after he passed she was unable with her family to afford to ship his body back to zimbabwe and so after his cremation friends of hers in the united states gathered around to buy a suitcase for her so that the ashes of her husband could be taken back to his home country and so in one of the most tragic scenes in the book her her son is walking with her through the airport carrying this suitcase she says this it was heartbreaking to think that my son would soon carry his father's remains from the usa to africa we would fly out of boston on january 11th now that we were about ready to board the plane i was nervous about going home i dreaded facing my family and my late husband's family all alone i felt stripped of my covering since leaving zimbabwe in 1996 felix that's her husband had been unable to return home now we were bringing him home in the form of ashes of course i knew it was not my fault but i still felt responsible for not bringing my husband home alive i think i know how naomi felt once again it felt as though i were dreaming and i would wake up at some point the brook had grown dry and i couldn't fathom how i'd get through the next day not to mention the rest of my life

after a while my response seemed mechanical aside from the times i broke down and wept two days later jet lagged and weary and simply filled with grief we held felix's funeral and his ashes were buried if only i could lie down and sleep and wake up to find that i had dreamt everything that had happened over the last few months as a mother of a two-year-old however i had no choice but to pull myself together i won't ruin the rest of the story for you but i bring that to us not out of a sense of just wanting to find the most tragic situation but to highlight what's happening here in very fast time in verses one through six much like alice ruth and naomi are experiencing the same thing especially for naomi she's in a country that's not her own a country where she's not been born and in quick succession she too experiences tremendous loss and she comes like alice as well from a country that knows its own history of turmoil we're told in verse one that this is in the days when the judges ruled if you remember from the story of the bible you know that the time of the judges was after the exodus from egypt it was after god's dramatic deliverance of his people after their time in the wilderness but it was before the reign of the kings it was before david and solomon and saul were in israel and it was a time that was tumultuous israel was often under the rule of other nations it was a time of rebellion where they were constantly going from god and returning to him and as you read the book of judges you notice that the world around them continues to unravel as things become more and more chaotic to the point that there's this question near the end of the book this statement that in israel there was no king which raises a question of where is the king and on top of that we see in verse one there was a famine and so there's chaos in the home country and a famine forcing them to go to a new land they go from judah to sojourn in the country of moab now remember the moabites were the people that were descended from lot lot in genesis was i believe the nephew of abraham and he had chosen to go to the land that was rich and plentiful rather than the land that god had promised and so this was now a land where people worship not yahweh not the one true god but they worshiped false gods like baal and chemosh and so here we have god's people in god's land having to leave for a foreign country for the sake of food by the way do you know what the city bethlehem bethlehem do you know what that word means means house of bread and so in the house of bread there is no bread and so god's people are leaving we find out the name of the husband in verse two the name is elimelech and the name of his wife naomi and then they have these two sons and they go and they dwell in moab by the way the sons names roughly in hebrew translate to weakling one and weakling two and then in verse three much like we heard from the testimony of alas chidzero but elimelech the husband of naomi died and she was left with her two sons these two took moabite wives the name of the one was orpah and the name of the other ruth they lived there about ten years and both malin and chilian died so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband and the author is intentional here in verses three and five of using that word twice the word of left by the way just as a teaser for the rest of our series we won't talk about this anymore today but there are many words in the book of ruth that only appear twice and the first occurrence

and the second occurrence will have great significance that's all i'm going to say okay and so we see this great tragedy the emotions that alas shares in her story we can imagine what's going on for naomi especially she's returning to a land with no sons and no husband she's too old to have more children to provide for her most likely her parents have died unable to remarry and probably without any kind of skill to provide for herself and so she finds herself here in the midst of tremendous and intense grief but much like alas said naomi too has to keep moving and so we see in verse six then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of moab for she had heard in the fields of moab that the lord had visited his people and given them food now as i've thought about this sermon and this sermon series and talking about suffering as i mentioned before it's it's an overwhelming topic to think about and to talk about because there's so many things we can and do and could and should say and so with this passage before us to be able to say not everything but something we're going to have one question and one answer from these six verses one question and one answer i mentioned the names of some of these characters but i did not tell you the name of a limelight what it meant the I at the beginning is the same I that shows up in god's name el shaddai which means god the almighty and so the I means god the melech shows up in other biblical names that we see like a bimelech and it means king and so elimelech literally translates to god is my king god is king and so indirectly this text is asking us a question if the house of bread has no bread and god's people have a famine but the pagans don't and if god is my king is dead is god still the king if god is my king is dead is god still the king is god still at work in the dark it's a question that naomi and ruth have to ask and it's a question that we ask as well is god still the king if my spouse and i both said i do and then a decade later one of us says i don't is god still the king if the relationship that i hoped and dreamed would end in marriage ends in heartbreak instead is god still the king if a father has a daughter and he grows up with dreams of walking her down the aisle and he has to bury her instead is god still the king if it feels like my life is filled completely with scheduling and attending doctor's appointments is god

[20:10] still the king if someone who should have protected me and watched out for me hurt me instead is god still the king if i get up in the morning and i cry and i go to bed at night and i cry and i know all too well why or perhaps even more frighteningly i don't know why is god still the king when my mom or my dad has to go off for another deployment and is god still the king if a chaplain comes and knocks on my door and it's a question that if we're honest about the reality of living in this world that every single one of us if we have not had to answer it will have to answer it one day so that is why god has given us here his word is god at work in the dark it's a question that we ask here in this room inside the church and it's a question that people outside the church are asking as well i've met folks in this city and other cities who when it seemed that things were dark they decided that god was not the king and so they walked away from him and his church can there be hope in the dark i told you there was going to be one question and one answer that's our question but this very same text is going to provide us with our answer as well we're going to go back to verse 1 in the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land there's only two other times that that phrase appears in the bible there was a famine in the land and both of them are in the book of genesis genesis chapter 12 and genesis chapter 26 speaking of abraham and isaac who had to leave where they were because of a famine and if you're familiar with those stories you know that god took them there and then he brought them out with even more than they originally had and so as an israelite is listening he's hearing those phrases and thinking what is god going to do with this famine we've seen his faithfulness in the past we've seen the way that god works that famines are something that he often uses to bring blessing on his people we also see an inability to have children the author doesn't state this but we're told that there was ten years that passed and so the question that is not explicitly raised is where are naomi's grandchildren why did they not appear and the original hearers would have thought again back to genesis of sarah who was unable to have children and yet god used for a great lineage and so we're seeing small notes here of god being at work in the midst of this tragedy as we hear echoes of stories that have come before but then what is implicit becomes explicit in verse 6 then she arose with her daughters in law to return from the country of moab for she had heard in the fields of moab that who the lord had visited his people and given them food she heard in the fields of moab that the lord had visited his people and given them food and so we see

that even in the midst of tragedy god is still at work even in the darkest of times god is still providing for his people and protecting them he's providing for ruth and naomi as he brings food to their homeland and he's also guiding them ruth and naomi know what their next step is and so indirectly god's providence is leading them back to the land of israel so we have our question is god still the king the answer is yes even in the darkest of times god is still at work the answer is yes even in the darkest of times god is still at work he's at work leading his people he's at work providing for them and he is at work guiding them that doesn't mean that he's going to remove every obstacle it doesn't mean that everything in this life is going to be made whole but god is leading and guiding and providing even when life goes dark god is leading and guiding and providing even when life goes dark the readers of this story would not only know about god's acts in the past in the book of genesis the way that he works and the patterns that have been laid down in their stories but they would also remember that he was the god of the covenant now covenant is a big word there are many different ways to define it but the way i'm going to define it this morning is this the covenant is god's promise it's his promise that he made in places like ezekiel 37 and levičius 26 and his promise is this i will be your god and you will be my people and i will dwell with you forever forever you i will be your god you will be my people and i will dwell with you forever and so we see here that same god in the midst of the death of loved ones coming and remaining faithful to his people and so we as well can look to god knowing that he has not given up on us if we are part of god's family then the presence of tragedy in our lives does not mean that god is absent the presence of tragedy in our lives does not mean that god is absent the characters of this original story could look to the character of god they could look to the ways that he had provided in the past and they could look as well to verse six here that the lord had visited his people brothers and sisters the lord has visited us in a much more great dramatic and miraculous way because unlike those in the old testament who looked back to god's redemption from exodus we can look now and know even more about his character than they did because we know that his promise to be our god and be with us was fulfilled in christ that it was christ who came and took on the body of a man and lived among his people we just

finished the gospel of matthew you remember in the very first chapter of matthew jesus is given a name do you remember what it is it's emmanuel which means god is with us and so we now can see even greater proof and a down payment on god's goodness and his love and like a good leader jesus was willing to suffer more than us and so the question of why god allows suffering is going to go unanswered but instead we have the assurance that in the midst of suffering he is with us he is with us and we know that we can trust him we know that we can trust him because he and his providence has ordained suffering but he ordained the most for himself that as painful as it is to be separated from someone that you've been intimately connected with for decades imagine how painful it is to be separated from someone that you've been perfectly connected to from all eternity and so that christ in his sufferings is the greater and fuller revelation of god visiting us as he did the people of israel when i was growing up i was at a small church in this denomination and i knew a family there they had a farm a long way away and that was where i i believe i rode a horse for the first time and got to experience a different life than a general suburban life that i grew up in and that family had had a very difficult past there was a time before i met them where they experienced a traumatic car accident so the mother and the children the father was at home and when the police informed him of what had happened they said your family has been in a devastating car accident and we have sent them to two separate hospitals because there's no one hospital that would be able to save all of them and when we put them in the ambulance they were alive but we cannot give you any guarantees of how they're doing now and taking that news the father had no idea what to do he would share his testimony many times and he said that at that moment he was unsure whether to visit his wife whom he'd vowed to forsake all others for or to visit the hospital that his children were in because they were without a parent and he was afraid at the same time that he would visit the wrong one that he would go to the one with the dead and not the living and in that moment he felt lonelier and more isolated than he had ever been and he realized that there was no one in the whole world who knew what he was facing at that moment and there was no one who understood and then the next thing he remembered and thought was that Jesus understood remember that Jesus had given up even more and suffered even more than he was even in that moment and he remembered that Jesus loved him and had died for him and in that moment that was the only thing he had that Jesus was faithful to him and in that moment while no one else understood Jesus was with him caring for him providing for him and guiding him and that Jesus understood when no one

else did brothers and sisters Jesus is our great and mighty king and so we can follow him and we can trust him even in the darkest of times please pray with me dear father in heaven we thank you that you are the king of kings and the lord of lords we thank you that in your sovereignty you gave yourself the greatest suffering in this world and so even when we don't know why we know that you are with us that you're guiding us you're protecting us and you're providing for us we ask that you would remind us of that now here this morning we ask all of this not because we have earned it but because your son has earned it on our behalf and so we ask it in his name amen god you