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Ruth 1:1-6

First Message

Andrew Drake

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WHERE IS GOD WHEN WE NEED HIM?

SERIES: FROM EMPTINESS TO FULLNESS

I know it is difficult for many of you to sing with conviction about the Lord's faithfulness these days. What was once a corporate financial disaster has become for many of us a very close and deeply personal crisis. A billion dollars here and a trillion dollars there, and still we suffer deeply. Members of my own family have been laid off. I have met in recent weeks with an increasing number of individuals struggling with tremendous worry and despair over their unemployment and loss of savings. It seems as though we live in a world of bad news. I find myself either changing the channel or fast-forwarding through most of the news to watch the sports highlights.

It's not just our financial difficulties that test our faith. The back of our bulletin today reveals the cry for help and prayer as people face issues like addiction and cancer. Is there anything we can do to protect ourselves, anything that will ensure that our life will be better or easier? Is there a guarantee that our world or our life will get any less painful or tragic?

We all have dreams. Some of us dream of riches and fame, but most of us dream of good health, good relationships, and a secure future for ourselves and those we love. These are good dreams, but if we live long enough, some of our dreams will shatter and remain shattered. We wonder why God isn't fixing and restoring these dreams. Why doesn't he find me a job, or restore my savings, or fix my kids, or heal my marriage, or cure my cancer?

What do we do when our hopes and dreams for ourselves or others are unfulfilled? When our present is more than we can bear, and our future looks bleak, when we suffer with doubt and fear because life has not turned out the way we thought it would, where do we turn?

Where is God when we need him? Does he really care about me? Where will I find hope and salvation in my time of trouble?

The book of Ruth looks at this very issue. Our focus this morning will be on the first six verses of chapter one. This section serves as a prologue to the story and provides the initial setting and predicament that dominates the book. The opening words set the scene.

I. The Setting (1:1a)

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. (Ruth 1:1 TNIV)

The judges ruled between the initial conquest of Palestine under Joshua and the establishment of the monarchy under Saul. These first few words tell us more than just when the book of Ruth takes place, they also tell us the spiritual condition of the time.

There should not have been a famine in the Promised Land. God himself described the fertile land as a "good and spacious land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8). Deuteronomy 28 tells us that the physical condition of the Promised Land reflected the spiritual condition of the people of Israel. The Lord told his people that if they remained faithful to him he would bless the fruit of their womb

and the crops of their land (Dt 28:4). But he also warned that if they turned away from him he would stop the rain and they would suffer a drought (Dt 28:22-24).

The book of Judges says that "the days when the judges ruled" was a period of moral and political chaos in Israel, when the people of God repeatedly turned away from him and "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21:25).

A famine in the land during the time of the book of Ruth indicates that the people were not serving and obeying the Lord, and were therefore under his judgment. The purpose of this judgment was redemptive. It was intended to awaken the people to their sin and bring them to repentance, obedience, and worship of the Lord.

National unrest, pervasive immorality, and widespread misery, these are the things which primarily characterize the time of Ruth. This is not unlike our world today. The mood back then, as it is now, was dark. It was a very trying time to believe in the loving providence of God.

Into this darkness the book of Ruth shines a ray of hope. The focus of the book is not on a powerful king, a charismatic judge, or fiery prophet. It is a story of ordinary people facing difficult circumstances that tested their faith.

As we read and reflect on this text together I hope we will come to a greater understanding and appreciation for how we fit into God's story of redemption. I pray that no matter what great sorrow or joy may come our way in life we can see that the decisions and actions we make each day are full of meaning as part of God's far-reaching and eternal plan of salvation.

II. The Sojourn (1:1-2)

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. (1:1-2)

During the time of Ruth, Israel was a kinship-based society. The health and wealth of the extended family was extremely important. Elimelek and Naomi were doubly blessed by having not just one but two sons. Sons were very important for several reasons. They were important to Elimelech because they would carry on his family name and maintain the family property through inheritance.

Second, sons were important to Naomi because they were a source of social and financial security. Women at that time could not inherit land or cultivate it without a male relative. Having sons ensured that even if her husband died Naomi would not be out on the street. Her sons would inherit the land and would be able to provide the food and financial resources necessary for her to live comfortably.

Though Elimelek and his family were Ephrathites, a well-established clan with ancestral ties to the land and deep roots in the community, they were not living comfortably. Due to the famine, this distinguished family was struggling like every other family in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, which means “house of bread,” was so named because it was so fertile it served as the “bread basket” for nearby Jerusalem. We should not miss the irony that in this time of judgment and famine even those living in the “house of bread” did not have enough bread. Under these conditions Elimelek left his home and community in Bethlehem and with his family journeyed to Moab, which lay east of the Dead Sea.

In the heart and mind of the Israelites Moab was known for several things, none of them good. Moab was the son of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter. The Moabites worshipped the pagan god of Chemosh, to whom human sacrifices were made. When the Israelites were on the verge of entering the Promised Land, the men of Israel indulged in sexual immorality with Moabite women and made sacrifices to their pagan gods. The Lord’s anger burned against them and disastrous consequences followed.

It is no wonder that in Deuteronomy 23 we see that the Lord strongly warned Israel to avoid the Moabites. To the men and women of Israel, Moab was a place of deep perversion and godlessness. It was a strange choice for Elimelek to sojourn even if permanent migration was not his intention.

Whereas the pagan religions sought to control the processes of nature with their fertility rites, the people of Yahweh were taught to trust him for blessing and prosperity in the land of promise. Instead of waiting on the Lord in this time of famine, Elimelek and his family chose to leave the Promised Land in the hope of finding blessing elsewhere. We soon learn that the purpose of their journey, to escape death, did not achieve its goal.

III. The Tragedy (1:3-5)

Now Elimelek, Naomi’s husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. (1:3-5)

What was meant to be a sojourn for just a brief period stretched into a voluntary exile that lasted for more than 10 years. Not long after Naomi moved to a foreign land, leaving her home and her people, tragedy strikes. Her husband Elimelek dies, leaving her a widow with two sons. The story quickly moves from tragedy to scandal as Naomi’s two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. For the Israelites, intermarriage with foreigners, especially Moabites, was frowned upon, to guard against being influenced into worshipping their pagan gods and idols (Exod 34:16; Deut 7:3; Deut 23:2-4).

Even after ten years of marriage neither of Naomi’s two sons had children. Bereft of her husband or any grandchildren, her grief is soon compounded by the death of both of her sons. The emotional toll was extremely severe. But now Naomi’s very existence is at risk. In the Ancient Near East, an aging woman left without a husband or sons would be in a desperate situation, especially in a foreign country where she had no extended family to help her. Her men had died, and so had her hopes and dreams.

It is hard to imagine the depth of Naomi’s pain. An author I have come to appreciate is Polish priest Walter J. Ciszek. In his book “He

Leadeth Me,” he reflects on the persecution, suffering, and loss of life he experienced from the invasion of the Soviet Red Army into his village of Albertyn in October of 1939. His description of the tragedy he suffered gives us insight into what Naomi was feeling:

Suddenly, our whole world had changed. It is impossible to describe the feeling that comes over you at such a time. The feeling that somehow, in an instant of time, everything is changed and nothing again will ever be quite the same. That tomorrow will never again be like yesterday. That the very trees, the grass, the air, the daylight are no longer the same, for the world has changed. It is a feeling impossible to describe, and yet one that every wife who has lost a husband knows well.¹

In our next study we will hear Naomi speak and get a sense of what is going on in her heart and mind. But if this was your experience what would you be thinking and feeling? Why is this happening to me? Where have I gone wrong? Are you still in control, God? Can I trust you?

It seems as though Naomi’s life is spiraling deeper and deeper into darkness and despair, with no end in sight. All possible relationships of rescue seemed to have been severed. Humanly speaking there was no possibility of restoration in her life. If her story was on the TV news we would be tempted to change the channel. But there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon.

IV. The Lord Visits (1:6)

When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. (1:6)

In just a few short words we hear of potentially life-changing news. The famine is over. In his compassion, the Lord has come to the aid of his people. The literal translation is that the Lord “visited” his people. He had not forgotten or abandoned Naomi or his people. The famine was not over because the weather just happened to change. There is rain and food in Israel only because the Lord has taken the initiative to provide for his people.

Even when his people turn away from him the Lord keeps his covenants. The Lord is alive and actively comes to help his people in need. This good news is a herald of hope, calling Naomi to return home not just to Bethlehem but to the Lord and his people.

The circumstances and promises of this world have come up woefully short for Naomi. She doesn’t know what the future holds. She doesn’t have a master plan for how to get her life back on track. She simply decides to return home, where she has heard the life-saving and powerful news that even when life seems darkest the Lord is always present and faithful to his people.

The first 6 verses of Ruth encourage us to see our entire life, including our suffering, in the context of the faithfulness of God. Naomi certainly suffers, but her suffering is placed within, not outside, God’s providence.

Where is God when we need him? It is the timeless question of those who are suffering. It is the question of the psalmists and the prophets. It is the question which Gideon put to the angel of the Lord in a time of great distress:

When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.” “But sir,” Gideon replied, “if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said,

‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian.”

The LORD turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” “But Lord,” Gideon asked, “how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” The LORD answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together.” (Judges 6:12-16)

Though it is often unseen, the Lord is at work all the time in the circumstances of our messy and frequently painful lives. We may never know the “why” of the tragedies and pain of our life, but what we do have is the assurance that is so often repeated throughout the Bible, including Jesus’ word to his disciples, “I am with you always.” When we encounter times of trouble and tragedy and God seems uncaring and distant, we can rest assured that he is with us each step of the way. He is good. He is present with us even though it may not appear that way.

It is important and good for us to grieve when suffering comes our way. But as believers in our risen Lord we grieve with hope. Even in the darkest tragedy God is near. We are not alone. The Lord has taken the initiative to be with us. He has already made the first move and reached out to us in his love and mercy. He has given us his Son Jesus Christ and his abiding presence and comfort through his Spirit. Though we may not always comprehend his purposes we can trust his love for us. As the apostle Paul put it, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

In a world spoiled by sin, none of us is exempt from misfortune. There are times, sometimes long seasons, when life simply doesn’t go the way we think it should. In the months and years ahead we will all likely face losses we did not think possible, and illnesses that defy treatment, but our grief and pain are not wasted. Our loss and heartache are a tragedy, but it’s never only a tragedy.

When our earthly dreams are shattered that awakens within us a deep longing, a desire for more than what this world offers. In the midst of our pain the Lord is at work drawing us to himself, building our faith and character, and molding us in the image of his Son.

Larry Crabb says it well:

What He’s doing while we suffer is leading us into the depths of our being, into the center of our soul where we feel our strongest passions. It’s there we discover our desire for God. Through the pain of shattered lower dreams, we wake up to the realization that we want an encounter with God more than we want the blessings of life. And that begins a revolution in our lives. We can welcome our suffering now as an opportunity to meet God and experience genuine transformation.²

Gloria Wellman, my dear friend and awesome secretary here at the church, has suffered deep pain at the loss of her husband Art. She has graciously and courageously accepted my invitation to come and share with you about her journey. I have had a front row seat to observe the way the Lord has been working in the midst of the pain in her life to make her a beautiful Christ-like woman. I have seen how the Lord has transformed her vulnerability and grief into his power and grace, not only in her own life but also in the lives of those around her.

Trusting God After Art’s Death

Gloria Wellman: I was married for nearly 25 years when my husband died suddenly of a brain aneurysm 12 years ago. We were at the stage in life when our two children, Allison and Ryan, were in college, and we could begin concentrating more on our lives together—going on spontaneous vacations, cooking dinner together or going out for dinner. We had new freedom to do the things we’d been wanting to do for so many years. We even had someone to care for Art’s mom, who had Alzheimer’s, whenever we wanted to get away for the weekend. And the best thing out of those 25 years was that we’d finally gotten better at our communication skills. Life was good.

When this tragic and what seemed to be an untimely death occurred, I went through all the emotional feelings you can imagine: confusion, fear, despair, anger, and even bitterness. I felt like I was on an emotional roller coaster for such a long time. How was I going to make it through this week, this month, or this year? Why did this happen? What could we have done to prevent this? Was this a cruel joke? I even wondered if God had abandoned me.

But I needed to be strong for my children. I needed to learn how to keep us all afloat. How about finances? Art took care of all that. What about his mom? Who was going to take care of her? I needed Art’s comfort and his wisdom. I remember one morning just falling on my face before God and crying out for help. I just couldn’t do it by myself anymore. I needed God more than ever. It seemed that Art was the one I depended on for most of my security all this time. I would have to depend on the Lord more than I had ever done before.

When Andy asked me to share part of my journey, I went back and read my prayer journals from those first few years. I can say that God has been faithful to that cry for help so many years ago. I got a great job. Look who I work for! I found a wonderful group home for my mother-in-law, who has now passed away. Allison and Ryan both finished college. We had saved just enough. Soon after that they got married to wonderful people who know the Lord and are learning to depend on him too. That was our prayer. And best of all, God has blessed me with three precious little grandchildren.

When my mom died many years ago, I saw my dad serving God in so many ways. He was a great role model for me. I knew God had a purpose for my life. When I was asked to go to Romania on a missions trip, I knew I had to take the focus off of myself and begin my new single life doing things that would further his purpose. I have now been to Romania many times and I have been blessed by these trips in so many ways. God gave me a huge number of young people whom I feel he put in my life to listen to when they had the need, and to love them, knowing I could feel their pain of loneliness or despair.

I also began opening up my home to ministries, such as holding TwentySomethings meetings in my home, hosting Bible studies and housing Romanian girls and a very special girl from Slovakia for the summer. This would become a small ministry to the young people in my life. God gave me a new perspective on life. I’m now learning to focus on those who have so much less than I do. He has opened up a whole new world to me and I’ve learned to depend on his faithfulness more than ever before.

To continue taking the focus off of myself, I participated in a Widow/Widower’s support group in the area. When I was asked

to facilitate the group, I said I would, because I knew that now I could empathize with those who are left without a spouse to deal with the huge things such as grief and loneliness, as well as the multiple tasks that are necessary in daily life.

There are still many times when I wrestle with God because I feel lonely for the companionship I once had. Although God has blessed me with a great family and so many friends, I still have the desire to have someone to share the joys and sorrows of life with, someone to go on vacation with or to have a quiet evening with. When I am feeling down in the dumps, I sometimes still feel that God has forsaken me.

But death is not the only kind of loss. There is loss in a divorce, or the loss of a job, or a child who has gone astray. You may know someone who is facing grief and may wonder what to say or do to make them feel loved. What blessed me most was a simple hug which said so much more than words like, “be patient, time will heal your wounds,” or “he’s in a better place now.”

I have learned firsthand that God’s ways are not my ways. I may never know why he allowed this to happen, but I am still learning that he is in it with me. He has not forsaken me. He is a God of love and a God of grace. I only need to remember to call on him during those lonely times. And I need to remember that he is in control of my life and cares about every detail in it. I pray that I never forget that

Here is a quote which was forwarded to me recently when I happened to be in one of those slumps. It was perfect timing, a reminder that God is in the details of my life and that he does care for me as he cares for each of us.

Bear not a single care thyself,
One is too much for thee;
The work is mine, and mine alone;
Thy work is to rest in Me.

Thank you.

Instead of pushing God away can we embrace his love in the midst of our pain? There are no easy answers to why life seems so unfair. There is no special formula to ensure we won’t get hurt again. But there is a clear choice of where to turn when life is hard: either to go to God with all our hopes and dreams, doubts and fears, or we can seek comfort in some other source.

Though we are sinners who deserve only his judgment, salvation and life are ours because the Lord has graciously and mercifully acted to provide for us through his Son Jesus Christ. By faith in him, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are made new. We are his people. He is always present within us. We are never alone or abandoned or forgotten.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35). There is no famine with Jesus. He sustains us for all eternity.

Some of you may recognize you have been seeking salvation and life outside the presence of God. You freely admit that you have not placed your faith in Jesus Christ. I invite you to give yourself to the Lord this morning.

Our Heavenly Father yearns for intimacy with each and every one of us. Let us all spend time in prayer before the Lord, confessing our sin and thanking him for the gift of salvation and forgiveness offered to us through his Son Jesus Christ. Let us offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

Father, we come to you just as we are, in our pain and suffering, our disappointment and anger, our fear and sadness. We confess our need for you and we pray that you would heal and comfort us. We come to you because you are the only true source of life and hope. Thank you for never abandoning us, but instead reaching out to us in your love and faithfulness. Preserve us in our faith and strengthen us to cling to you in every circumstance. Mold us into your image that we might reach out in love and compassion to those around us. We thank you for the good work that you are accomplishing in us right now. We look forward to the coming day when our every tear will be wiped away, where there will be no more sin, no more pain, and no more death. In the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ Walter J. Ciszek, *He Leadeth Me* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 18.

² Larry Crabb, *Shattered Dreams* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 4.