

coming home | sermon series

PHIL CAMPBELL takes a new look at the old story of Ruth

A New Look at an Old Story

The book of Ruth is one of the jewels of the Old Testament. Set in the barley fields of Israel, it's a story of love and loss, despair and redemption... and emptiness refilled. It's a book that you simply can't read without your heart being warmed. Effective preaching of the book will be measured by whether that warmth is somehow conveyed to the listeners.

a) The Situation

Establishing the "life setting" of the first readers of the book of Ruth can give a good indication of the *original* "pastoral purpose" of the author.

While the opening verses explicitly set the narrative in the time of the Judges, there are a number of indicators that the book was written and circulated much later. Even the opening formulation creates a distance between reader and narrative: "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land..."

The parenthetical comments in Judges 4:7 create both a temporal and spatial separation between the original readers and the setting of the narrative:

"(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.)"

The phrase "in earlier times" indicates that the custom under discussion has passed from common use, and even common knowledge. The original readers, in other words, are living at a time much later than Ruth. Even more

striking is the double occurrence of the phrase "*in Israel*," which creates a spatial separation between the anticipated reader and the narrative world as well as a temporal one. In other words, the intended first reader may or may not be located *in Israel*.

So, it's plausible to suggest that Ruth was a book written for people long after the time of the Judges, living in a place far from Israel... specifically, Israelites in Babylon either during, or after, the exile.

For people like that, the Ruth narrative addresses a key "pastoral" issue – "What sort of welcome can I expect from God and His people when I go home." Naomi is the prototypical returnee from exile, empty and crushed. Ruth is a gentile seeking refuge among the people of Yahweh, as foreshadowed by the prophets. Deuteronomy 30:1-6 promised a warm welcome from Yahweh for those who return from far off lands with true repentance and pure hearts – Ruth confirms this promise in narrative form.

In the way the story is crafted, there's also a clear message for "welcomers" in the portrayal of Boaz. Ideally, Israel as "people of God" will be a place where both the wandering "Jew" as well as the Gentile will find warm welcome and refuge.

b) Christian Implications

The Christian implications of these two pastoral issues are straightforward. Wanderers need to turn back to God; God's people should welcome them warmly. Ruth contains strong images of "redemption," which give helpful background in understanding the redemption secured by Jesus Christ.

So, the big idea of the book is that People need to turn back to God and find redemption in Christ.

Barry Webb helpfully points out that Ruth tells the story of a "returning prodigal." It is well worth tracing the parallels between the account of Ruth and Naomi with the famous parable of Luke 15. There are clear echoes in both structure and detail, as the words of the humble returned "gleaner" in both cases indicate:

"May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant-though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls." (Ruth 2:13)

"I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." (Luke 15:19)

The similarities throw light on both passages – especially if Jesus is alluding to the return-from-exile themes of Ruth. The message is the same – those who return to the Father after a long journey in a far off land will find both redemption and a warm welcome *from God*; they should find a warm welcome *from his people* too.

Responding to the "feel" of the book

Ruth is a book that needs to be "felt" as well as understood. There is a beauty and symmetry in the structure of the story, as well as a tangible warmth. (Or am I just becoming a sensitive new-age guy?) The *kindness* that permeates the narrative will ideally move the hearer. I wanted the sermons in this series to touch people emotionally. (Gee, I *am* just

becoming a sensitive new-age guy!)

In part, the approach I took to the series was shaped by the challenge presented by John McClean in his article in *The Briefing*. Using Ruth as an example, John argued (in essence) that too strong an adherence to the Biblical Theology paradigm could strip meaning from the text. I was keen to allow the narrative to do what the original author intended. One intention was to highlight the place of “*hesed*” – covenant kindness – with a view to seeing such kindness in the lives of God’s people.

As I prepared the series, I consciously looked for ways of describing and illustrating kindness in a way that would move people. I also looked for new ways of using images and music – for example, single images were projected behind the talk to set the scene each week, and a photo-montage set to Eva Cassidy’s “Fields of Barley” was shown at the end of the final talk in week 4 as a way of encouraging people to think back through the series. (The program “PhotoJam” from shockwave.com is an excellent tool for creating instant audio-visuals like this.)

The series worked particularly well. There was a lot of feedback, as well as concrete action generated by the talks. A couple of widows in the congregation were surprised by gifts and offers of practical help - people began to *actively* look for ways of showing kindness to one another, and turned theory into action. Okay, it wasn’t all out revival – but it did our congregation good.

The break-up

It seems to me that there are three options with Ruth. As a short (four chapter) book, it can easily be preached in one talk. Alternatively, it falls cleanly into two parts, as demonstrated by Bryson’s series “Ordinary People.” However, I chose to preach the book in four talks, based on the four “movements” which are well

delineated in the traditional “chapter structure.” In doing this, care had to be taken to create a tension in the opening chapter which would gradually be resolved. The tension came from the question “*If you’ve wandered a long way, what sort of welcome can you expect from God and his people when you come home?*”

Resources

Barry Webb in Five Festal Garments
David Atkinson The Message of Ruth, BST



Talk 1—Going Away & Coming Home (Ruth 1)

Key idea: Elimelech is a “do-it-yourself” kind of guy who leads his family into disaster by abandoning the promised land. If you find yourself far from God, what sort of welcome can you expect if you turn back?

1. The Dangers of “Do-it-Yourself”

Fixing things yourself is not always a great idea. I tried it with a cupboard. Here’s the account of a family that tries to solve their problems by abandoning the promises of God...

2. Listening to The Background Music

Jaws - or a Coke ad?

Scenes of people swimming at the beach can be part of a Coke ad, or the movie JAWS. Often, you need the “background music” to make sense of a scene. The background to Elimelech’s plan sounds an ominous note.

Pick the soundtrack: at night church, we played a “pick the mood” game with sound-clips which generated different emotions. We played each soundtrack behind a reading of a section of chapter 1. Is it comedy? Is there rising tension? When you know the background from Deuteronomy, you’ll recognize the tension...

Background briefing...

a. A promise

Dt 6:3 - Hear O Israel, and be careful to obey... so that it may go well with you, and that you may increase greatly in the land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord your God promised you.

b. A warning

Dt 7:3 Do not intermarry (with the nations around you). Do not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you...

3. Elimelech’s do-it-yourself disaster

- to Moab (v2)
- and he died (v3)
- Mahlon and Kilion married Moabite women (v4)
- and they died (v5)

4. Naomi’s solution

Naomi makes the wise decision of turning back to the promised land and throwing herself on the mercy of God and his people.

... and Ruth’s choice (1:16)

Ruth the Gentile wisely decided to do the same.

5. Don’t try this at home!

... the ways we wander

You think you’ll be better off solving your problems your way. But that leads to disaster.

... but what welcome will there be if you have?

If you’ve done that and everything has unraveled, Ruth has good news for you.

Some comments from the conclusion ...

For a lot of people, Ruth raises a very relevant question. Because the situation we're looking at here in the book of Ruth is not unique, is it? What kind of welcome... if you've wandered far from God and you come back? The answer's going to play itself out in Ruth over the next few weeks. And let me tell you now, it's a book with a very happy ending. But it's not automatic. And from here in chapter 1 there are some tough lessons to learn. Especially if you're the sort of Christian who's a bit of a do it yourself expert when it comes to organising your life the way you want it.

I was watching a bit of the Jerry Springer show the other day. One of those American day time talk show guys. And there's Bobbie, all-American girl, confessing that she's been cheating on Jason. And she said this; she said, "I deserve to be happy. That's why I started seeing Rob. He makes me happy. We talk. He listen to me. I deserve to be happy. So Jason, I'm leaving."

Now let me tell you, that's not an idea that's limited to a few crackpot Americans on the Jerry Springer show. That's actually the way most people think, including Christians. That's the way a lot of Christians make their life decisions. And it's the way Elimelech made his decisions as well. God might have promised blessing here... but I'm going to go look somewhere else. Because I want to be happy. I want to be satisfied. And I want it now.

And so a Christian wife, you might hear saying exactly the same sort of thing. Well, my marriage isn't happy. And I deserve to be happy. And there's this guy at work who listens to me. He makes me laugh. And so she's gone. I know a young Christian couple, that's exactly the story. Just a few weeks ago. And she's convinced that the thing that's best for her, real happiness, is going to come from walking away from God.

Or maybe the Christian in business. And success is so close you can smell it. Just a few details in the way. Easy enough to cut some corners, maybe falsify a few details here and fiddle the tax there. And then I'll succeed and be rich and then I'll be happy. Or the promotion. Got to take promotions, don't you? Without even thinking about it. And yet suddenly you find you're not free on Sundays anymore. Or your job asks you to move away. Where there's no church family to be part of. And it seems like such common sense at the time.

Or you're Christian and single. And you're looking for a partner, and you can't find another Christian who seems just right. And so instead of waiting, instead of trusting God and hanging on, it's so tempting to sort things out your way. And you find that nice guy or that nice girl who has got no interest in following Jesus at all. And you say, it'll be okay.

All sorts of ways we can make up our minds to go looking for blessings in other places. Which means walking away from where Jesus is. And it's almost like you can look back over your shoulder and see Jesus fading into the distance. And you say you'll be better off that way. And yet it ends up in ruins. Let me be very clear. If you haven't done that, don't go there. Don't be tempted. Because the price tag is disaster. And one day you'll look back and you'll wonder how on earth you were so dumb.

But in the end, Ruth's a book about coming home. Coming home isn't something you do lightly in a situation like that. It's not something casual and glib. But there's a point on the road where there's a decision to be made. Naomi's learned her bitter lesson and she's heading home. And Ruth's determined she's coming with her. No casual commitment. So the question is, if you've messed up and you want to come home, what sort

of welcome is there going to be from God and His people? If this is a story about you, you'd better read ahead and find out. For the rest of us, be here next week. And we'll find out.



Talk 2—Welcome Home! (Ruth 2)

Key idea: Kindness redeems the broken. God has been kind to you. Be kind.

1. What kind of welcome?

- judgement? abuse?
- It should be better than *that*!

Philip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing about Grace?* opens with a powerful story of a drug addicted prostitute who is horrified at the thought of seeking help from the church because she feels "bad enough already." The newspapers are full of stories of church abuse. It should be so much better than that!

2. Harvesting Kindness

- meet Mr Kindness
- share our food and drink; take some extra grain

I looked for some heart warming illustrations of kindness to amplify the effect of the story of Boaz's compassion for Ruth. I found this one in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*:

Sandy is a teenage American girl, she's about 15; she lives with her mum and dad on a small farm; and she's got cancer. Which means she's got no part time job like her friends, Mum and dad are doing it tough. And she's got no spending money. So this fifteen year old girl decides to take her pet calf to the auctions. Sell it; have some spending money. Mum and dad load up the calf on

the trailer, off to the saleyards. They figure the calf's worth about \$200. The auctioneer knows their situation. And before he puts the calf up for sale, he says to the crowd, I hope you don't mind me saying this, but Sandy here's doing it tough. She's not well. And the family's got a lot of medical expenses. And she's selling her pet calf here just to try to get a bit of cash. Well, the auction starts. And the bids go to \$200. Which is what the calf's really worth. Up to \$500. In the end \$2000. Which leaves Sandy and her family just astounded. And then the guy who's bought it says, I'll pay for it. And she can have it back. And we'll put it up for sale again. Which they did. And it reached another two thousand dollars or so. In the end, according to the book I was reading, they sold it ten or fifteen times that day. And in the end Sandy went home with her pet calf. And about \$20,000 as well. Because of the kindness of that one auctioneer. Who understood the situation. And stepped in to help... I get all misty with stories like that. And the point is, kindness doesn't have to cost \$2000 a time, either. It can be in the smallest things...

3. Two Key Conversations

- with Boaz (v10-12) - refuge with God is refuge with me!
- with Naomi (v20) - kindness from Boaz is kindness from God

4. Get up and grow

- kindness and you
- the art of noticing
- gleaning in your paddock

Some comments from the conclusion ...

You know, for the people of Israel, their history as slaves in Egypt who'd been rescued by God, it was meant to shape the way they looked at other people. Here's what it boiled down to. You know what it's like to be rescued. You know what it's like to be poor and in distress. You know what it's like to be rescued from Egypt. So when you see someone else in a tight spot,

help out.

For Christians, the idea's exactly the same. You know what it's like to be loved. So be loving. You know what it is to have received mercy. So be merciful. There's a clear example in Ephesians 4:32. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." God in his kindness has had mercy on you. You do the same. I guess for an ancient Israelite reading Ruth 2, they'd look at Boaz and be warmed by his kindness and say, yep, that's how God treats us. That's how we should treat others.

And in the same way, we look not only at the example of Boaz, but at Jesus Christ as well. You've seen what kindness looks like. So how about trying some? You know, I've set myself a little assignment the last few weeks – trying to come up with a definition. A definition of kindness. Because it's one of those words, it's sort of somehow got weakened over time. Like the word nice. Kindness. Hard to define it without just turning it into something else.

But without using a dictionary, here's what I've come up with. Kindness is one of the big words that comes up over and over again in the book of Ruth. So we need to know what it's talking about. Boaz says to Ruth, I've seen your kindness to Naomi. Naomi says, when I look at Boaz I see the kindness of God at work. So what's a good working definition, so you'll know it if you see it? It's more than just being nice.

Kindness, I think, always wants to redeem – rather than destroy. Kindness always wants to rescue... rather than crush. Kindness will always renovate. Instead of demolish. Kindness sees distress. And wants to put it right.

Cruelty does the opposite, doesn't it. And you can see that at work plenty of times. That the distress, the

weakness of another... is turned to their disadvantage and hurt. That the weakness of another is just seen as an opportunity to crush, to gain the advantage. To compound the abuse. Kindness will always want to see the weak rescued.

As God did for the Israelites. As Boaz did for Ruth. As God in Christ has done for us. And so practical kindness will come from opening your eyes to notice someone else's pain. Funny thing, that first step is so simple... but so hard. Just to notice. Verse 10, can you see Ruth's delight. Just simply that she's been noticed. Same words from Naomi in verse 19. Blessed be the man who took notice of you. I wonder if often we just don't notice... the sort of situations where our strength could be turned into practical kindness. Because as the people of God, that's the sort of people we're meant to be. Seeing the problem. And graciously – in a way that preserves dignity and doesn't embarrass – trying to do something to help out.

So as we ask the question what sort of welcome is there from God when wanderers come home, what sort of welcome is there for anyone who wants to shelter under the wing of the God of Israel, the answer here in Ruth 2 is that there's a warm welcome. That the wanderer and the widow and the refugee will meet God's kindness. Expressed through God's people. Not condemnation. Which comes easily, doesn't it? And never the sort of cruelty and dismissal we're reading about in the papers.

So here's a little chapter of the bible that I think is meant to leave our hearts warmed. As we'll see next week the Kinsman redeemer of this little family in Israel pointing forward to the one who has Redeemed us. A kindness that sees hardship. And wants to rescue rather than destroy. That wants to redeem and renovate instead of crush and demolish.

Can I ask you, as the people of God, when it comes to kindness what are you like? We'll have opportunities to show it this week. If only we notice.



Talk 3—Will You Marry Me? (Ruth 3)

Key Idea: I've given this talk twice, with two quite different endings. The romantic story of Ruth's proposal and Boaz's willingness to be her "redeemer" leads in one of two directions:

A. Boaz is obviously delighted by Ruth's offer. She could have gone after younger men, and is an honourable woman. However, an interesting parallel passage in Ezekiel points out that God has spread his cloak over Israel when she was far from attractive and honourable. Our redemption in Christ is like that.

B. A simpler ending heads directly for Ephesians 5, where Christ has given himself to redeem us as his "wife".

1. Dramatic Proposals

The TV Show *Marry Me* had plenty of great "proposals." I described a few before moving to the story of Ruth's proposal to Boaz.

2. The Background...

- two widows, coming home empty
- one kinsman-redeemer

3. A Mother-in-law's plan...

Great opportunity for one or two mother-in-law jokes here. I used the "don't need an airbag for the new car" line, and the cannibal who "hates his mother in law..." (just leave her on the side of your plate and eat the vegetables)

- how to set a man-trap (v1-4)

4. The Proposal (v5-9)

- spread your wing over me
Boaz has commended Ruth in ch 2 for seeking refuge under God's wings.
The NIV hides the fact that she asks Boaz to "spread his wing" over her.

5. The response (v10)

- yes... thank you! - Boaz is delighted by Ruth's proposal
- but there's a problem... a closer relative. What will happen?

6. Ruth's Return

- no longer empty (v17)
There's a strong play here on their "empty" return to Israel
With their redeemer Boaz, their empty days are over.

7. Redeeming the un-lovely (the long ending)

Redemption and Israel...

Ezekiel 16... "I spread the corner of my garment over you... and you became mine."

Israel was far from lovely when God redeemed her.

Redemption and you...

We were far from lovely when Jesus Christ died to redeem us.

Some comments from the conclusion ...

So as you see Ruth and Boaz and you want to get a picture of God and us, take all the appeal out of Ruth. And multiply the kindness of Boaz. And you get some sort of idea of it. Here's the story. Turn back to God from where-ever you've been. Do it humbly. And you'll find he's already provided a redeemer for you. A redeemer better than Boaz. A redeemer who goes to the cross -

to pay the redemption price for rebels like us. Jesus Christ. And you don't even have to make yourself beautiful for him to be acceptable. That comes after. And so as we share in the Lord's supper this morning, we're reminded of that. That we've been provided with just the redeemer we need. That as you humble yourself at the foot of the cross, there's a hand to lift you up. From where-ever you've been. To fill you. No matter how empty. And a reminder I guess to all of us... to never forget where we've come from. That as forgiven sinners we all come from humble circumstances. And none of us has pride of place. As we give thanks together to the one who redeemed us at a great cost. Let's remember that together now... as we share in the Lord's Supper together.



Talk 4—Bad Call! (Ruth 4)

Key idea: A nameless relative wants to make a name for himself... so declines to be Ruth's redeemer. Bad call! It's a worse call if you say no to God's offer to redeem you through Christ.

1. Oops!

History is full of bad decisions. Here are some of them...

Dick Rowe is hardly a household name. You've probably never heard of him. But it could have been different. Dick was an executive with Decca Records in London in 1962. Responsible for choosing new talent for recording contracts. If Dick Rowe is famous for anything at all, it's for this. When he auditioned the new Liverpool band called The Beatles on New Year's day 1962, he wasn't impressed. On his advice, Decca Records refused to sign them. And on the company

memo Dick Rowe said this. He said, "We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out." Bad call.

One of many. History is full of the stories of people who with the benefit of hindsight would have done things very differently. Like the executive at Western Union Telegraph Company back in 1876. Who said "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is of no value to us." Or a similar report when a company called Texas Instruments built the first vest-sized pocket computer. They called it a pocket calculator; it was about the same size as a pack of cigarettes; and Texas Instruments built it for the US air-force. It will be useful, they said, in the missile and space industry. But because each unit would cost over \$29,000 the company said they could see no other immediate practical use. Bad call.

Or for the movie buffs, did you know Gary Cooper turned down the lead role of Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*? He said, "*Gone With the Wind* is going to be the biggest flop in the history of Hollywood. I'm just glad it'll be Clark Gable who's falling flat on his face and not me". Bad call.

Here's another one to add to the list. An all time classic. How would you like it if you had the chance to be part of the family tree of the greatest king of Israel? How would you like it if you had the chance to be the forefather of the redeemer of the world? And yet you turned it down. Because here in Ruth chapter 4, that's exactly what happens.

2. An opportunity to redeem

- Mr Nameless comes to town
- the offer of land (v4)
- the hidden cost of redemption (v5)
- bad call! (v8)

3. Redemption – an investment of love

- paying the debt of another in kindness

4. Another Kinsman Redeemer...

- meet the baby
The focus shifts from redeemer Boaz, to the child Obed, who will renew and sustain them.
- the family line unfolds
King David
Jesus Christ (Matt 1)

5. Redemption and you

- don't miss the offer
- do put out the welcome mat

Some comments from the conclusion ...

We're right at the end of Ruth. So it's worth a recap. Here's Naomi. Gone far from the promised land and come home empty. Here's Ruth. From Moab. And they've both come back to take refuge in the Promised Land with the people of God. A clear decision on the road. That the God of Israel was going to be their God once and for all. And what welcome do they find when they come home? They find that God has provided a redeemer for them. Who'll take on their debt. Who'll pay whatever price it takes to provide what they need... purely out of what the book of Ruth keeps calling "covenant kindness". A redeemer who'll fill their emptiness. And now a new redeemer in Obed. Who'll renew their lives and sustain them. Which in the end is the story of all of us, isn't it. In Titus 2, Paul says our Saviour Jesus Christ Gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness, and purify for himself a people of his very own, eager to do what is good.

Redeeming isn't cheap. The cost is, stepping in to take on the debt of someone else to set them free. And what Jesus has done is exactly that. For each of us. At the cross. Ruth was a book I think that was originally meant to warm the hearts of Israelites who were far away from God. Calling them home.

Maybe it's doing the same for you. Painting a picture of God's kindness. And a great offer. That if you come back the welcome mat's out. There's a fatted calf on the Barbeque. There's a party waiting. Because God's a God who loves redeeming. And you don't have to live in spiritual debt anymore. No matter where you've been.

You know it was crazy in a way for that other relative to say "no" to being part of God's big plan as Ruth's redeemer. He had better ideas. But how much more crazy if you were to say "no" to Jesus. And miss out on the opportunity of a lifetime. Bad call.

And just as we close, a reminder too... that the people of God need to love what God loves. And if you've seen any kindness in the book of Ruth, keep making it your kindness. If you've seen a warm welcome for people who come home to God, keep making it your welcome. As we keep growing to be a church that loves to say welcome... to anyone looking for their debt to be paid by Christ Jesus the redeemer.

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Online

Full text and audio of the Ruth series is available online at www.mpc.org.au/resources/

Useful images and artwork can be found by searching for "gleaner" at www.google.com—click the "image search" tab.