

Dire Straits

Series on the book of Ruth

By Dr. Liam Goligher

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Ruth 1

Preached on: Sunday, June 2, 2013

Tenth Presbyterian Church

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

Thank you. Do congratulate this choir just assembled today and performing so wonderfully for us tonight.

Well, turn with me in your Bible, please, to Ruth. That isn't to save the other choir wasn't good or aren't good but they just assembled and they were great. Ruth 1. Many of us enjoy a good love story. Others of us who are male, probably struggle with love stories but you can't turn on the radio without listening in our popular music to stories of people meeting, falling in love. You can't go to the movies without having to go through that genre of movie that tells love stories, girlie movies. You can't go into a bookstore without seeing them packed full of romance novels. And I know that some of you guys, you have been hauled along by your girlfriend or by your wife to a movie and you have gone with that sense of suspicion that somehow or other you don't want any of your mates to see you there only to discover that what you thought was going to be real sappy and sickening has turned out to grip you and to leave you leaving the movies feeling, "Wow, that was not what I expected."

I think you're going to find that as we read through the book of Ruth. This book is about romance. It's about, at one level, 2 people meeting, falling in love, getting married and having children. It's the stuff of life. It's a very interesting story, fascinating story. It will leave you saying "Wow" at the end of it. It's about the romance of redemption. The romance of redemption. But it's much more than a story, of course, probably one of the best short stories ever written in all history. A great story. A romance. It's also, of course, holy Scripture which is why we are reading it this evening and why we come to it understanding that this little story is God breathed because all Scripture is God breathed, that it is profitable for righteousness, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that all of us may be complete and competent, equipped for every good deed.

So we come to this story expecting a lot from it but it's also a very human book. It tells the story of ordinary people, real people, people who lived in a particular place and time. People who lived and loved and lost. People like us. But the story has been written from a human perspective, superintended by the Holy Spirit for our learning. Yet a second glance at the book will tell you that this is a book about God. It's a book about God and in

particular it is a book about Jesus. God doesn't get very much of a mention, actually, in the book but he is certainly behind the scenes all over the place. If you want to really get your head around what the book is about, you have to look at the 2 main parts of the book outside of the center. The center, we'll see in a moment, is about a particular subject that is very important, the subject of redemption. That's what the centerpiece of the book is about and it is preceded by a prologue and followed by an epilogue. In the prologue, God is not mentioned officially except in the name of the opening character, Elimelech, verse 2. Elimelech, his name means "God is King." God is King. It's convenient that his name means that for our story as we shall see. When you look at the epilogue to the book, you will find the genealogy and that genealogy is significant because we discover that the main characters in the book end up being the grandparents of David who becomes the king, the Lord's anointed and, in fact, Ruth unusually for somebody who is an outright pagan, finds her name appearing in the genealogy of the King of kings and Lord of lords. The plot thickens.

It's the Lord Jesus himself who taught us that the interpretive key that unlocks the whole Bible is, in fact, his own story. Every page says something to us about the Lord Jesus and the big theme that I said lies at the heart of the book of Ruth as we'll discover in time, is this theme of redemption. In fact, the whole Bible can be said to be about redemptive history, the history of redemption. The story of the human race which from the fall of Adam has needed to be redeemed, that is, bought back from its slavery, freed from its slavery to fear and sin and death. It lies at the very heart of this story and to bring this great plan of redemption about, God has been in the business of superintending the details of the lives of countless men and women down through the centuries, putting in place the bits and pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that eventually would provide us with a profile of the coming King, the coming Messiah, the Savior of the world. And the very ordinary story of this book, of people caught up in misery, 2 individuals being caught up in a story of love, falling in love, meeting in unusual circumstances, eventually getting married and having children, moves the story forward. Actually, it becomes a major shift in the forward movement of the story towards the arrival, first of King David, and then of King David's greater son, the Messiah, Yeshua HaMashiach, the King of kings.

Now, I said the book is a brilliant story, structured around the central point with a prologue and an epilogue. Today we're going to look at the prologue and it's full, this prologue, of history, irony and tragedy. Let's look at the history. There was nothing romantic about the times in which these people lived. You can see that from the first verse, "In the days when the judges ruled," or lived. That's more than just a chronological marker telling you at what point in history this happened, that is a theological marker. The Bible is never just interested in recording history for history's sake. There is always a significance when our attention is drawn to a particular place or time. Very often, the Bible's interest in history is written not from the perspective of the secular historian who is concerned about the movers and the shakers and the big names and the big dates of the world, no, God's concern is often with much lesser things, lesser people.

"The days when the judges ruled." A 200 year period after Israel had entered the Promised Land under Joshua and before there were any kings of Israel, roughly from

1250 BC to 1050 BC. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," so wrote Charles Dickens about the period of the French Revolution in "A Tale of Two Cities." Well, that did not describe the day of the judges, actually, let's just half that statement of Dickens, "it was the worst of times." It was a dark time for the people of God. It was one of those periods of which it is very hard to find anything, anything good to say. The book of Judges which just precedes the book of Ruth, tells the story of those terrible days. It records a cycle of behavior, a kind of pattern of spiritual ebb and flow. There are about 6 cycles in the book and the rhythms are virtually identical. Each begins with Israel's sin. Each declension is attended by Israel's suffering under the hand of God. This suffering softens their hearts and they begin to seek God in prayer and God raises a deliverer, a rescuer, a judge, who comes riding to the rescue to restore them and bring them back. Each time the tide, as it were, comes in, it goes out again because of sin and recurs again and again and again because of God's grace to recalcitrant Israel.

But as you look at the cycles in the book, you discover that each cycle following the other leads to greater and greater deterioration in the story. You notice a change in the reaction of people to their circumstances. As time goes on, the crucial step of repentance by the people, that part that I mentioned where they realize their condition and they realize it's because they are distant from God and they wise up to that fact and they call on God's name and they repent of their sin and they cry to God for mercy, that component is missing as time goes on.

There is also a change in the character of the judges as time goes on. The first of the judges, Othniel, is a man who is fairly upright and faithful. He is a good man and God uses him. But the character of these judges as time goes on gets worse and worse and worse and worse until you get to Samson who is an utter disaster of a man, "a he-man with a she weakness," as someone once said. And he is an utter disaster. He breaks every possible taboo. He pushes the envelope until it's nearly impossible to think of him even as one of the Lord's servants. Samson, there is virtually nothing you can think of that you can actually say until he brings the roof down at the end of the story on top of the Philistines, virtually nothing good to say about him.

Those were days of chaos and days when there were heroes who delivered the people and as the book ends, that is, the book of Judges, you find a nation imploding. A people who have completely lost their way. They are as far from God as is possible to get having lost entirely their identity as the people of God. It seems as if God might rethink his covenant, forget his promises, abandon all that he had said to Moses he would do and leave them. The final words in the book of Judges sum up the state of affairs. You can see it if you have your Bible open, the very last verse of Judges, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Who was it that was doing what was right in their own eyes? It was the people of Israel, God's covenant people, his chosen people. It was precisely those people whom he had brought out of their bondage in Egypt and delivered by a mighty hand and sustained for 40 years before bringing them into the Promised Land. Those people on whom God has put his name and said, "These are a people for my own possession." These people who were refusing to subject themselves to God's covenant law.

That's the setting of the book of Ruth. It's depressing. It's telling us that while Israel's history was moving further and further away from God, increasingly placing itself deeper and deeper under the divine judgment, that was not the whole story. It never is. When God's church seems to be breaking apart, when God's church seems to be going through days of decline and declension, when those looking on look at God's church and God's church seems to have lost the plot, it is never the whole story. There is always a remnant, a remnant according to the election of grace. There still was a man like the man Boaz who will appear in the story, who was a godly man. And there will still be converts, people brought out of darkness into light, brought from paganism to the worship of the one and only God, like Ruth. And there will still be the covenant keeping God who is determined to keep his promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and achieve his purpose in the world.

There is history in this little paragraph. There is irony in this little paragraph. It's ironic that in the days when the judges ruled and there has been a whole book given over to these characters, these super men of Israel's past, that our story should begin with the personal history of a certain man of Bethlehem. That's basically how you can translate it. "In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man," or a certain man, "of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab." You see, the Bible is not just interested in the big names, superheroes like Samson. Here is the story of an unknown. He's no hero. He's no public official. He is no memorable leader. You could have googled his name and you would not have found anything under his name. You could have Facebooked him and he wouldn't have had a Facebook page. There is nothing about this man that would ever hit the headlines of any of our glossy magazines or found him in "Who's Who." He was a nobody as far as the world was concerned. No chronicler recorded the details of his life. No reporter wrote a glowing obituary when he died. No politician or nobleman eulogized at his funeral. He was Mr. Nobody, from Nowheresville, Bethlehem in Judea.

Yet here we are tonight over 3,000 years later and we are reading the story of this man, Elimelech. Isn't that amazing? God notes the life of all those whom he has made. Everybody he has made. Everybody. Not just the great and the powerful and the rich and the famous and the movers and the shakers and the high and the mighty get God's attention. So why is he mentioned? Because he has a part to play in the salvation of the world. Can you imagine? He has no idea. No matter how obscure you may feel yourself to be, no matter how inconsequential you think your life story is, don't doubt the fact that every life has a trajectory for good or for evil. Somebody had to be Adolph Hitler's grandma or aunt. We do not know the impact of our lives on others for good or for evil. And the mention of his name in this story reminds us that there is no such thing as "little people" to God. There are no incidental circumstances. The great German preacher Helmut Thielicke said, "Tell me how lofty God is for you and I will tell you how little he means to you. That could be a theological axiom. The lofty God has been lofted right out of my private life. If God has no significance for the tiny mosaic pieces of my little life and for the things that concern me, then he doesn't concern me at all." He doesn't concern me at all.

Something ironic. There is something ironic about the famine and the irony is in the name of the place where the famine came, Bethlehem. Bethlehem means "the house of bread." It was quite literally the breadbasket of Judah but there was no bread in the breadbasket. There was a famine in the land. This was an unusual set of circumstances. We remind ourselves this is the Promised Plan. This is the land that the spies saw and when they reported to Moses and the congregation of Israel, they explained to them that this land was flowing with milk and honey. Where is the milk and honey now? There is a famine in the land. It raises a theological problem, that is, a problem about God. Hadn't God chosen these people? Hadn't God given them this land? Hadn't God promised to meet all their needs?

So why are they in dire straits? Prizes for knowing, by the way, that Dire Straits was also the name of a band. One or 2 of you did and asked me what I was going to say about them as we just said it. They were in dire straits. Well, it goes back to the original covenant and its stipulations: God had promised to be with them so long as they kept his laws but should they abandon him, he reserved the right to send enemies, famines, calamities of one kind or another against them. They should have known this good and well because in Leviticus 26, God has said to them, "If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase." So when the rains are withheld, it's an "hello" time, "Wake-up Israel. What has happened? God has not kept his word. What's the problem? Is it with God or is it with you?"

The hard hand of God. He had promised them terrible curses would result from any unfaithfulness or apostasy and the curses included what God would do to their food supply and they hadn't taken him seriously. They should have because he had cursed the ground because of Adam's sin. He had flooded the earth in the time of Noah because of man's disobedience. Now here he is punishing his adopted son, Israel, for disobeying him. Listen to these words, "But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today," Moses says, "then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you." And here were these people, according to this first verse, they are living in such a time, those days were happening, "There was famine in the land."

Now, we shouldn't read that into our situation. We should not transfer what we read about Israel and apply it to America. We're dealing here with a covenant people, the people of Israel. They were meant to be a signpost to the world. They were meant to demonstrate to the world what it looked like to have a relationship with God and at this stage in the history of the world as God is working, as his people are a nation state, what God is doing with them, with Israel, is treating them like children. They are at an immature stage of human development and he deals with them the way we do, very often, with our own little children. I remember when our children were at school and they used to enjoy that little slot during the day that was called "show and tell." They would take something from home and they would take it to school and they had to get up in front of the class and they had to show this thing and explain what it was and the significance of it to the rest of

their classmates. And when you read the Old Testament and the way God deals with Israel there, it is show and tell. He doesn't simply give them an exposition of Romans like Romans is, he actually does things with them. He is a hands-on God. He gives them blessings and benefits and if they disobey him, he takes those benefits and blessings away. He is teaching them the hard way what he is like, that he keeps his promises and he also keeps his threats. He is a God who can be trusted either way. He can be trusted, that's the way he is.

No, this does not apply to America but the application is to the church because today God's people are not a nation state but they are a congregation, they are a church, and he does chastise the church for its disobedience. When God's people abandon the word of God and they opted for ceremony and drama in the Middle Ages, he sent them a famine of hearing the word of the Lord. The very absence of preaching in the churches became the judgment of God. "If people will not hear me, they will have nothing to hear." He withdraws the very food that would feed the people of God. At the time of the Reformation when Europe rejected the great Reformation and the Puritans and the evangelical movement, they had to suffer cold deism and liberalism as a scourge for displacing the word of God. Whole bodies of people on the continent of Europe and in the British Isles were cast out of their churches, cast out of their homes and came far away in order to settle on another continent, this continent, in order to follow the dictates of their conscience.

One of the things we do today is that we displace the word of God with so-called worship and music and other fads which come and go, driven more by taste than by any sense of the glory of God. I remember reading this, this comment by Sally Morgenthaler, "For all the money, time and effort we have spent on cultural relevance and that includes culturally relevant worship, it seems we came through the last 15 years with a significant net loss in churchgoers, even given the proliferation of mega-churches." In my experience as a minister in the last 20 years or more, the thing that has been driving conservative churches, whether they are conservative in the reformed sense or just conservative evangelical churches, is this cry to be culturally relevant. They did this in Britain. They started doing it longer ago because we are ahead of you or they were ahead of you in decline. They tried it starting about 40 years ago and there has been a precipitous drop in actual churchgoing. There is more than one way to skin a cat, as they say, and there is more than one way God can send a famine upon the people of God for their disobedience.

But there is another ironic thing here, there is an irony in Elimelech's decision. His parents must have been, at least, God fearing people. They gave him, if it's not a catchy name, at least it's a God fearing name, Elimelech, "God is King," but instead of living under the rule of God the King, he opted to leave the Promised Land and seek his security far away in a pagan country that was under the curse of God. Here is another commonplace here, in a day when disobedience was the norm, yet another man of Judah was disobedient and instead of trusting God, he took what he thought was the easier and safer option. Instead of staying in famine-stricken Israel, he would go to the green fields and lush pastures of the Moabite area rather than trusting in the rich promises of God. He

was a man of his time. What does it say about the people of that period, the very last bit of Judges? "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes," and here is an example of a man who is doing what is right in his own eyes. There is no indication that he prayed about it. No indication that he sought God about his decision. He looked around and he saw famine. He looked further afield and he saw Moab. He saw plenty. He pulled up stakes and off with his family he went in order to live there. That, by the way, is a quite different thing from the multitudes who were persecuted and who came to America to settle and to practice their religion.

Elimelech's decision was not that kind of movement. It doesn't fall into that category. You see, Moab was the very last place on the planet that a man of Israel should be seen. There was a history with Moab. Moab itself arose out of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter. The king of Moab, Balak, hired a prophet called Balaam to rain down curses on Israel when they left the Promised Land. The women of Moab became a stumbling block to Israel by seducing the people to worship their false deities. And just recently in the story, in the near past, the Moabites had oppressed Israel for 18 years during the days of Eglon. In other words, Moab represented the hereditary enemies of God's people. It was a pagan people with foreign gods. This was not a good place to bring your family if you wanted to raise them to be godly. It was playing with fire. He should have reflected on his name and asked himself, "Is God really King of my life? Does God have the first say what I do with my life and where I go with my life?" Actually, the reality was that God was no more King of Elimelech's heart than he was in the hearts of anybody else in that country. He was doing what everybody else was doing, he was doing what was right in his own eyes.

If only he had heeded the words of Moses, calling the people to return to the Lord. Here was Moses's great promise, "Return to the Lord," he said, "then Yahweh, your God, will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your ground." In other words, God had promised Israel that if they came back to him, he would give them these very physical blessings. It was "show and tell" time as God dealt with Israel. "Show and tell" time so that you and I could learn the spiritual principle that God keeps his word. You see, what was happening when Elimelech took his family from Israel to Moab, he was moving his family from their one place, the one place on the whole of planet earth where God had promised to be present because his tabernacle was there. Where God had promised to bless his people. He was moving them away from the only place where they could find God in those days. It was a serious move.

That raises a question: why was it that what was so clear to the author of Judges was not clear to the people of God? Why couldn't they see this repeated pattern of ebb and flow? The answer is that the sin that alienates God often disguises its nature and buys its legitimacy from the surrounding culture. The worship of Baal began to seem normal and natural. What became odd was a refusal to accept the gods and goddesses of the nations around about. Quite frankly, it never entered Elimelech's head that there was anything wrong in going to Moab and entering into its cultural and religious life. Here is a man who goes there. What this man does for his family when the famine arrives in Judah, the

church often does, by the way, when it experiences a downturn. What happens when the church experiences a downturn? It looks around and it thinks, "There must be something we can do to make things better. Well, we'll take this from the culture. We'll take this from the culture. We'll try this idea." We look around and we think we can perhaps make this better if only we are a bit more like that or like this or the other thing. We accommodate to the culture. We find something in the world that might help the church to put it back on track and it never does.

David Wells once reflected on the outgoing tide of evangelical prosperity like this, "Does faith first decline internally, losing its doctrinal substance, its God centered worship, its discipline, its serious preaching, its faithful service? Thus beginning to drift, does it then fall prey to the external allurements in the culture? Is that how it happens? Or do the external allurements first intrude upon the faith? Does one small compromise after another follow each other so that doctrine first loses its importance and then eventually loses its shape altogether?" It's so ironic, isn't it?

Then there is tragedy in the story. They say the grass is always greener on the other side and on the human level it seemed to be. They went there and they didn't die of famine. They survived. By the time we meet them, they have been there for 10 years. Verse 1 tells us they went to sojourn there. That means they went for a little while but by the time we get to verse 2 we are told that they went there and they remained there. They settled down. They had grown to love the place. They were living now permanently in Moab. And the principle here is that when you have a heart to get away from God, sometimes God lets you go and when you have a heart to find satisfaction outside of God, sometimes God lets you find it for a while.

The family find the move goes very well. Soon they are getting their feet under the table; they settle down. Things go very well. The children grow up and they marry. They marry Moabite women even though that had been forbidden in the law, of course. In fact, a Moabite person was not allowed into the assembly of the Lord for at least 10 generations, that's 400 years. Most likely it refers if you were to marry an unbelieving person from Moab. And part of this was because of the level of idolatry. Moabite idolatry was disgusting. They worshiped gods of nature. They engaged in ritual prostitution and sexual practices that were dreadful. Their religion was an abomination to God. It was dirty. It was unclean. But having set out ignoring the word of God, you see, now they didn't have a conscience. The boys married Moabite women.

Then tragedy strikes. First, Elimelech dies and then one after another, these boys, the husbands of these women, die. Mahlon which means "sickly." Chilion which means "failing." They die. I remember once reading the entry in a school magazine by a girl of 13. She wrote, "Life is sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, loving and leaving, sickening and dying, and that's what it's all about," and as you get to this part of the story, it looks like this. But this tragedy, of course, took on other dimensions. As a believer, of course, we look at death differently because the resurrection of Jesus has taken the sting out of death but if you're not a believer, you don't have that. Death is death.

Look at the other dimensions here that Naomi, as she loses first her husband and then her boys, she is left bereft. She is left bereft. "Is this the judgment of God?" Not only has she experienced famine, now she experiences utter grief. Low upon blow upon blow. Tragedy upon tragedy. She is bereft, alienated and alone with her daughters-in-law which is either good news or bad news depending on your daughters-in-law. Mine are a delight so I'm happy.

So what do we learn about from the prologue of this book? It's a bit of a depressing bit tonight to stop here but I think the lesson is in Elimelech's name, "God is King," because his fingerprints are all over the place, aren't they from our perspective? It was God who sent the judges. Bad and all though some of them were, it was God who sent them. It was God who made the promises of blessing that were captured in the name Bethlehem "house of bread." It was God who had warned against foreign gods like the gods of Moab. God was all over the place and he was going to be seen even more fully in the epilogue because in the epilogue we see that in the midst of all of this un-Godness of the story, God was present.

"Thrice bless'd is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field when he
Is most invisible."

And if you are at a stage in your life when you think God is invisible, you cannot see his handiwork, let me reassure you as we read this story and in some ways we leave it hanging this evening, that God is in the story. It's going to be a great story. The end is not yet. It's not the end of your story yet. God is not finished with you yet. As you look around your family and you see tragedy or you see hurt, you see brokenness, it's not the end of the story yet. God is in the story. God has a plan, you just don't see it yet. It may happen beyond your lifetime. It may be the second, the third, the fourth generation before the impact of your ordinary life ends up pointing to Jesus.

Let's pray.

Father, we ask you that in your mercy this evening you would help us to get our heads around this lovely story and introduction tonight and pray that we would see the Lord Jesus in all the pages of the Bible. We read about Bethlehem, the home of King David, the sweet singer of Israel. We think of David's great successor, Yeshua, the Messiah, our King, our greater David, our Lord, and pray that you would bring us to his feet now as we close. In his strong name we pray. Amen.