

Ruth 1:1-22

Introduction to Ruth

I. Historical context

v. 1: “in the days when the judges ruled”

Settled in the promise land but a monarchy was not yet established

A dark time in Israel’s history full of unfaithfulness and backsliding

II. The theme is “hesed” (steadfast love in action)

A. Possible translations of hesed

loyal love, steadfast love, loving-kindness, mercy, faithfulness

B. Definition

1. An active, free, selfless, sacrificial love that leads a person to go beyond the call of duty and love in ways no one has a right to expect

2. Hesed is not something you feel or think, but something you do

C. Ruth is about God’s hesed to his people through thick and thin

Hesed is one of God’s fundamental qualities (see Ex 34:6, Ps 23:6)

D. Ruth is about people’s hesed to one another

E. The opening chapter is all about what happens when God’s hesed seems to disappear

The Passage

I. The tragic facts (v. 1-5)

A. Imagine: a famine, leaving your home to a foreign place, losing your husband, losing your two sons, being left with two foreign daughters-in-law from a different religious background

B. Naomi is a female version of Job

1. She lost as much as Job lost

2. She’s a woman which makes it even worse

a. In ancient patriarchal society, a woman’s security and identity were dependent on her role as wife and mother (especially the number of male children she could produce)

b. Naomi is stripped of her identity, value, and security—she has very little legal protection and is reduced to begging

c. She has no way of maintaining the family line (which was a crucial value in that day)

C. These verses describe those dark times in life when God’s hesed seems to have disappeared

II. The choices of the daughters-in-law (v. 6-18)

A. Naomi tries to persuade them to remain in Moab

--There is no future for them in Israel, so Naomi releases them

B. Both are committed to Naomi (v. 9)

C. Orpah’s choice to stay in Moab (v. 14)

No negative assessment is given of her choice. It’s sensible and appropriate. It’s what we would expect.

D. Ruth's choice to cling to Naomi (v. 14-18)

1. Her action (v. 14). This is a picture of hesed: going above and beyond what's sensible, appropriate, and expected. Sacrificially loving another.
2. Her words (v. 16-18): Amazing words of commitment and sacrifice.
 - a. We don't know what possessed her to do this
 - 1) Her love for Naomi?
 - 2) Having seen this Israelite family's amazing example of faithful living?
 - 3) God working miraculously in her heart?
 - 4) All the above?
 - b. She is a female version of Abraham (the man of faith)
She left everything he left but without a voice from heaven or a promise of blessing in the future
That's the radical nature of hesed

III. The Return to Israel (v. 19-22)

Naomi's grief is so deep. She can't even bear to hear her name (which means "pleasant") being used, so she opts for a more appropriate name, Mara (which means "bitter")

Reflections on Suffering

I. A posture of "righteous complaint" (see v. 13, v. 20-21)

- A. Unrighteous complaint vs. righteous complaint
Unrighteous complaint (grumbling) stems from a lack of faith in God's power and ability to provide (like the Israelites in the desert). Righteous complaint stems from a firm faith in God's faithfulness and power to change the situation.
- B. Examples of righteous complaint
Job 13:23, Ps 44, Ps 88, Ps 22
- C. The tension of biblical faith
 1. God is sovereign and in control of the events of our lives
 2. God is faithful and full of hesed
 3. The suffering in our lives
 4. These three create tension and the biblical response is to complain to God. Biblical faith wrestles with God, like Jacob wrestling the angel.
- D. Contemporary Christians often seeks to ease this tension
 1. They ease the tension by letting God off the hook and distancing his involvement from their painful circumstances
 2. They ease the tension by distancing themselves from God and withdrawing.
- E. God encourages righteous complaint
He includes these complaints in Scripture as if to say, "bring it on. Come wrestle with me." He gives us space to be angry.

II. A posture of hope

- A. God's hesed remains intact even when every trace of it is gone from our sight

- B. Naomi couldn't see the whole picture of what God was doing
 - a. Events that would lead to the birth of Obed and eventually King David
 - b. God producing character in Naomi that she would pass down the family line
 - c. Her "empty" state made her especially receptive to God's grace in the following chapters
 - d. In her suffering, God gave her an amazing gift in Ruth
 - 1) v. 21: she actually wasn't "empty." She had Ruth (who is "better than seven sons," 4:15)
 - 2) Ruth was a tangible expression of God's faithfulness and commitment to Naomi
 - 3) God works through his people
 - a. In our pain we can look to our friends as God's tangible comfort to us
 - b. In others' pain, we have the privilege of being God's tangible hesed to them

Conclusion

- I. Where do you need to engage God? Wrestle with him?
- II. Where do you need to hope?
- III. How can you embody God's "hesed" to someone else?

Discussion Questions

1. Opening questions: What struck you most about the sermon/the passage? What surprised you? What confused you? What did you disagree with?
2. How did the comparison of Naomi and Ruth to Job and Abraham change your understanding or add to your appreciation of the story?
3. On Sunday, we talked about the concept of righteous complaint before God. Do you agree that there is such a thing as righteous complaint? How would you distinguish that from a complaining that is not righteous?
4. Did you agree with the assessment made of much contemporary Christianity: that people try to relieve the tension created by their suffering too quickly either by letting God off the hook too quickly or withdrawing emotionally from God too quickly?
5. What experiences have you had with wrestling with God and what have you learned from those experiences?
6. Where/when in your life have you most experienced hesed (either God's or others')?