

The Book of Ruth

Risky Kindness

Peter H.W. Lau



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Email: sales@armourpublishing.com

enquiries@armourpublishing.com

Website: www.armourpublishing.com

And

Seminari Theoloji Malaysia

Lot 3011, Taman South East

70100 Seremban

Negeri Sembilan

Malaysia

Email: admin@stm.edu.my

Website: www.stm.edu.my

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Foreword

I am so pleased to see more books of sermons being published. The benefit of putting a sermon into print is that it can be read and reread. What is missed in a single hearing can be picked up again in a manuscript. And the fact that these sermons are about a little-known book of the Old Testament, and given by a most reputable Old Testament scholar are added bonuses. Both the sermons and the scholar are faithful to the text and engaging for the twenty-first century mind.

Peter has produced a fine book of four expositions on Ruth. You will find yourself re-reading them and referring back to the Bible text as he makes insightful comments about things you may not have noticed there before. These sermons communicate effectively but do not sacrifice depth of insight. This is a book which is fresh, engaging and spiritually invigorating. Produce more, Peter!

David Cook

Former Principal, Sydney Missionary and Bible College
February 2012

Editorial Preface

Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (STM) is pleased to announce the formation of its publication division and the commencement of the STM Series, of which *The Book of Ruth: Risky Kindness* is the third volume. The format of the STM Series follows a similar line to the successful SPCK series known as the International Study Guides (ISGs) and its earlier predecessor, the Theological Education Fund (TEF) series.

The STM Series will publish books under various subsections: Biblical, Theological, Historical, Missions, and Pastoral. These books are inter-cultural and contextual in approach and are written mainly by the lecturers and friends of Seminari Theoloji Malaysia. Although these books cater for a wider public audience, scholarship and relevance to contemporary local issues will be addressed and kept up to date.

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Rev Dr Ezra Kok Hon Seng

Rev Dr Anthony Y F Loke

General Editors

Author's Preface

While I was working on my PhD on the book of Ruth, people kept asking me to write a book aimed at the layperson. Well, since finishing my PhD in 2008,¹ I've been busy preparing the thesis for publication and preparing to serve overseas in Malaysia. We've been adjusting to a different way of life, settling our family in, and preparing lectures for STM. So I've had my hands full. But now that things are more settled, I've had time to think about writing something more accessible to the average churchgoer.

This book is a compilation of four sermons on Ruth which I'd delivered to various congregations over the last five years. I've had the privilege of sharing God's Word in Ruth with congregations from different denominations in Sydney, Australia; Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Penang and Seremban, Malaysia; and Hong Kong SAR. Since this book is primarily aimed at a Malaysian audience, many illustrations and applications have now to be adapted for local consumption. Nonetheless, they are relevant enough for a reader from any part of the world to understand and appreciate. The sermons have been revised for the written format, but I've tried to maintain the vitality of the spoken word.

Some of you may notice a strong biblical theology influence in the chapters; others may not be so familiar with this approach to reading the Bible. I think it is essential that the Bible is read from a biblical theology framework. Basically, biblical theology is a way of interpreting the Bible with an eye to the overarching narrative from Genesis to Revelation. It concentrates on themes

that flow naturally from the biblical text, and traces how these themes are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As it says in Luke 24:27, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Hence, the whole Bible, including the Old Testament and the book of Ruth, has Christological significance. To read a Bible passage fully and faithfully, we must consider how it fits into the overarching storyline leading to Christ. Otherwise, we can fall into the trap of moralism, legalism or character studies that leaves Jesus out of the picture. These theologically anaemic approaches fail to provide theological nourishment, mainly because they don’t point people to Christ, in whom can be found every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3). But that’s a topic for another time, and perhaps (God-willing) another book.

If I have whetted your appetite for further studies on Ruth or biblical theology, I’ve also listed some references for you to pursue your interest.

I would like to thank my wife, Kathryn, for her feedback on these sermons. She lends a critical ear to each sermon I preach, and they are much-improved because of her feedback. I would also like to thank my mother-in-law, Ruth Wong, for helping weed out typographical errors.

Not to us, LORD, not to us
but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness. (Psalm 115:1)

Peter Lau

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Easter 2012

1 Ruth 1: Responding to Suffering

Gerald Sittser, a Christian professor in the US, watched his mother, his wife of twenty years, and four-year-old daughter die, after a speeding car jumped its lane and crashed head-on into his mini-van. Three generations, all gone in an instant. In the weeks and months after the tragedy, Sittser said that he felt punished by simply being alive and thought death would bring a welcome relief. But he came out the other side of his darkness, and in his book, “A Grace Disguised,” he gives us these words of wisdom: “The experience of loss does not need to be the defining moment of our lives. Instead, the defining moment can be *our response* to the loss.”¹

Because we live in a fallen world, tainted with sin, suffering is one of the certainties in life. If you live in this world, you will suffer. If you haven’t suffered already, you will. Unfortunately, your number is going to come up sooner or later.

But it’s not the suffering itself that is defining, but how you respond to it.

Background to Naomi's Suffering

In this chapter we will see what we can learn from the way Naomi responds to her suffering and loss:

- how she responds well
- how she doesn't respond well
- how she responds to God.

We will deal with Naomi's response under the headings of leaving and returning, changing, and blaming. But first, let's look at what triggers Naomi's response.

As the story opens, we find a family immediately plunged into tragedy. As it says in the first two verses:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and 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 Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah (Ruth 1:1-2).

There's a famine, and Elimelech takes his family out of the land of Israel to a foreign land.

Bethlehem (literally, "the house of bread") has no bread, so Elimelech's family abandons the Promised Land to go searching for bread in Moab.

But what happens? As we see in verses 3-5:

- Elimelech dies. Naomi is suddenly a single mother in a foreign land.

- Naomi's sons take Moabite wives. Then her sons die.
- Naomi is now left as a childless widow in a foreign land.

And to cap it off, her sons die without leaving any grandchildren.

We get a better sense of Naomi's condition from the original language, because the word for "sons" in verse 5 is actually "boys." Even though her sons are grown, married men, Naomi still sees them as her precious little boys. It's like how I view my children. Even though they're now two, six and eight years old, I still see them as my babies.

We can feel for Naomi at this point. For her, it's one devastating blow after another. I would be shattered if I were to lose one of my boys, let alone both of them as well as my spouse.

But in Naomi's time, her situation is worse because now she has no man to provide for her. A single woman can survive and thrive in Malaysia today. But in Naomi's time, she is effectively destitute — in a foreign land, without social or physical support. She needs a man for provision, protection and legal representation. She has no life insurance policy or government welfare payments. Her life seems completely without hope. You would understand if she wanted to end it all.

So how is Naomi going to respond?

Naomi's Response

Leaving and Returning

The first thing Naomi does is to leave Moab. When she hears that God has broken the drought in Judah, she decides to return home. On the road out of Moab, she realises that it's better for her daughters-in-law to stay in their home country than to go with her to Israel. She says:

“Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

Naomi is absolutely right. Her daughters-in-law have a better chance of making a good life for themselves in Moab. After all, Naomi cannot provide for them in Israel. And what’s more, Israelite law strongly deters Israelite men from marrying foreign women. In other words, their chances of finding security through marriage are next to nil.

But Ruth and Orpah do not buy her argument. They just will not accept it. So Naomi comes up with another, more absurd line of reasoning:

“Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me — even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons — would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them?”

Naomi says, straight up, that she is too old to have any more children. But if, for the sake of argument, she could have children — who also happen to be boys — are they willing to wait until the boys grew up to marry them? Of course these are hypothetical questions. But Naomi is trying to present a watertight argument to persuade her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab.

And this time Orpah buys her argument. She turns and heads back home. But Naomi just can’t shake Ruth off. Ruth fiercely clings to her mother-in-law, and utters these well-known, yet still very moving words:

“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”

What a stirring expression of love and loyalty! Have you heard it being used in weddings? A student’s parents used it as part of their marriage vows. Some friends had the words engraved on the inside of their wedding rings. You can see why people would choose this vow for a wedding. Here Ruth commits herself heart and soul to Naomi, her people, and her God.

But Ruth’s vow is all the more striking given that Ruth isn’t committing herself to someone who can guarantee her a secure future. Naomi has not promised to provide for her. In fact, Naomi has just tried to tell Ruth to “go away” in no uncertain terms, because Naomi knows she can’t look after her. Hence, Ruth is leaving behind the security of her mother’s house and homeland. She turns her back on the certainty of food on the table at every meal, and a warm, safe home. Instead, she chooses to depart for a foreign country where she may have to scavenge for food in order to look after her mother-in-law.

Changing

But despite Ruth’s loyalty to her, by the end of our chapter, we see that Naomi becomes so bitter that she changes her name. Now

when Naomi arrives back in her hometown, you can imagine the stir it would have caused. It was probably just a small town of a few hundred people, so word would have got around like wildfire.

When the women of Bethlehem saw her, they would have seen the hardship and loss of the last decade etched on her face. Those who knew her when she left would have, in their minds, a picture of a mother with a complete family. Now before their eyes, they see her return bereft of her husband and sons. All she has is a foreign daughter-in-law in tow, clinging to her like a bad smell. It's no wonder the womenfolk exclaim in disbelief: "Is this Naomi?"

But when Naomi hears them, she sarcastically retorts: "Don't call me Naomi; call me Mara." In other words, she does not want to be known by her given name, Naomi. That name means "pleasant." She wants to be called Mara instead, which means "bitter."

This is like the Malaysian woman Azlina Jailani, who, in 1999, officially changed her name to Lina Joy. The reason? Lina had converted from Islam to Christianity. She realised her old name wasn't suitable for her any more; she didn't want to be known by her given name, which was linked to her former religion. Lina wanted to cast off her old name with the other remnants of her old identity. It wasn't her any more.

In changing her name, Naomi is saying that "pleasant" no longer reflects her identity. It's not her any longer. All she feels is pain, despair, and emptiness, so the name "bitter" is a better reflection of her character, her identity.

Blaming

But what is the reason for Naomi's bitterness? She feels that God has turned against her. As she says in verse 20:

"The Almighty has made my life very bitter.
I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back
empty.
Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the
Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

In this tirade Naomi doesn't hold back from saying what she thinks of God. In particular, she doesn't hold back regarding what He has done to her. She calls God "the Almighty," which means she acknowledges that God is in control of all things. And since God is sovereign, God is the one who has brought misfortune upon her. In Naomi's mind, He is the one responsible for disasters that have come upon her and her family.

In my mind, though, it seems wrong to lay the blame for the disasters on God's shoulders alone. According to the Old Testament, famine is either a test from God (Deuteronomy 8:2-6), or a curse from God for disobedience (e.g. Leviticus 26:18-20; Deuteronomy 28:17-18, 22-24). The right response would have been to trust God (Deuteronomy 8:1-20), or to repent and turn back to Him (Deuteronomy 30:1-2).

Yet what did Elimelech and his family do instead? They left the Promised Land to seek food in the land of Moab. Elimelech, a man whose name ironically means, "my God is king," disobeyed God and moved his family to sojourn in Moab (1:1). Their temporary stay lengthens as they settle down (1:2), and, before too long, weeks turn into months, and months into years. Their stay in Moab lasted at least ten years (1:4). Not surprisingly then, Elimelech's sons marry foreign women, which is also an act of disobedience to God's law (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). And also, in light of God's law, it may not be incidental that the sons' wives don't bear any children (e.g. Deuteronomy 28:18).

Finally, the sons fall under another of the covenant curses — death (Leviticus 26:21-22).

Some of the blame, then, must be laid at the feet of Elimelech and Naomi. Nonetheless, Naomi is right that her hardship has come from God, the Almighty, even if she should take some responsibility for it.

So Naomi voices her complaint to God, knowing that He governs her life (1:20). Some people think it is actually unspiritual to express negative emotions to God; that we should always speak to God in a controlled and sanitised way. However, I think it is healthy for Naomi to honestly express her complaint to God. In fact, Naomi is in good company here. Consider:

- King David in his psalms
- Jeremiah the Prophet in his so-called “confessions”
- Job,
- Jesus Himself, with his anguished cry on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

All these people in the Bible lamented or complained to God. They shared their honest, deep, heart-felt emotions with God. In fact, if we are in a close, intimate relationship with God our Heavenly Father, it is normal to communicate with Him in this way. To not do so would be unnatural. But our complaints need to be expressed within certain boundaries. We need to be careful that our complaints don’t turn to bitterness or resentment towards God. We need to keep trusting God to be both in control and a good God, or we will begin to doubt that God has good intentions for us. Listen again to what Naomi says:

“The Almighty has made my life very bitter.

I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty.

Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

Naomi thinks that God has turned against her altogether. She doubts God’s goodness. He may be in control, but in Naomi’s eyes, he definitely doesn’t want to bless her. In fact, she believes that God has brought her back empty. Perhaps she’s blinded by her grief and pain, which is understandable — to a point.

For is this the picture we get of God in the first chapter of the book of Ruth? Is Naomi really empty? The words of Ruth’s vow of commitment to Naomi may still be ringing in our ears, but it seems Naomi’s pain has drowned out Ruth’s words. So much so that Naomi even ignores Ruth’s presence — right next to her — as she despairs of her emptiness.

However, the narrator of our story does not leave us thinking that God only has bad intentions for Naomi. Straight after Naomi’s lament, we read these words from the narrator:

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

What is the narrator hinting here? Not only does he repeat that Ruth is by Naomi’s side, but also he tells us it is the beginning of the barley harvest. This means that Ruth and Naomi will have the opportunity to pick up leftover grains in the field. They have this right under Israelite law.

Part of Naomi's problem is that she can't see the bigger picture. Indeed, it's impossible for Naomi to see this as she returns to Bethlehem. For God is about to bless Naomi again in chapter 2. And we will see that it will be through her daughter-in-law Ruth. But that's a little way down the track for Naomi.

Application

For now, let us consider how our experiences are similar to Naomi's. Like Naomi, often all we can see is what is happening in our lives *right now*. The here and now is all we focus on. It is like looking at Google Maps — we see where we are, but not the entire route. When we are at street view where the starting flag is, all we can see is a view of the street. But we can't see the route and the ending flag until we zoom out again.

But God can see everything: right from our street view through to our destination.

Like Naomi in chapter 1, we won't always immediately understand the reason for our suffering. God may not even reveal the ultimate reason for our suffering in this life.

But the Bible assures us that, as Christians, God is using our suffering for our good. As it says in Romans 8:28:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

It's amazing how many people can testify that God has used suffering in their lives for their good.

In his recent book, *The Reason for God*, Timothy Keller (the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York) tells a

story about a man who lost most of his eyesight after he was shot in the face during a drug deal gone wrong. This man shares that he used to be an extremely selfish and cruel person. But the loss of his sight not only devastated him, but also profoundly humbled him. This man says: "As my physical eyes were closed, my spiritual eyes were opened, as it were. I finally saw how I'd been treating people. I changed, and now for the first time in my life I have friends, real friends. It was a terrible price to pay, and yet I must say it was worth it. I finally have what makes life worthwhile."²

While the suffering in my life has not been quite as dramatic, I can still look back and say how God has tested and refined my character through those trying experiences. Let me ask you: have you learned enduring lessons through the good times in your life? Or have you learned more enduring lessons through the tough times, the times of suffering? I'm sure many of you can also look back on your hard times, and see God working in them.

Like Naomi, we sometimes don't see God's kindness towards us in the midst of our hardship or suffering. And we're tempted to become bitter or resentful towards God, when

- We can't find a job, or when we don't get the promotion, or when we're made redundant at work.
- Your best friend turns on you, and spreads malicious gossip about you.
- Your boyfriend or girlfriend tells you, "It's over."
- You have to deal with your parent's dementia or your own chronic illness.
- You have ongoing tension with someone at church.

When we're hurting, it's an act of faith to believe that God still loves us.

But God has blessed us abundantly. At Christmas, we are reminded of His greatest act of kindness: the gift of His Son Jesus Christ. And nothing can separate us from God's love for us in Jesus. As it says in Romans 8:38-39:

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.

So, in times of suffering and hardship, will you trust God in your suffering? It may be hard to cling to Him through our pain, but God tells us in His Word that He is in control. He can see the bigger picture. And in God's scheme of things, He is working out something for our good and bringing glory to His name.³

2 Ruth 2: Living in God's Providence

The Adjustment Bureau is a movie that tells the story of David Norris, who is running for US president. But during his presidential campaign he meets a ballerina named Elise. As he falls in love with her, he finds that mysterious forces are trying to keep them apart. He's up against hat-wearing suits from what's called The Adjustment Bureau, who reveal to David his future: if he gets together with Elise, he won't become president. I won't spoil the ending for you, but since it's Hollywood, you can guess what happens.

It wasn't such a great movie, but it raised some interesting questions:

- Do things happen by chance?
- Is there some Great Unseen Force controlling our lives?
- If so, what role — if any — do we play?