

The courage to stay

Ruth 1

‘The Church in the West doesn’t need more teaching, it needs more courage.’ I read that quote recently, and I can’t remember where. But I think it’s probably true.

In Western Europe and the USA, Christians have gorged themselves on Bible teaching in thousands upon thousands of sermons, books, university courses, small groups, blogs, websites, apps. But for the most part, the Western Church isn’t healthy or growing. It’s just getting fat and bloated, hidden in its armchair from the rest of the world.

But make no mistake, in the rest of the world, the Church is healthy and growing. They may not have the well balanced diet of teaching that we consume week by week. But they are exercising - exercising courage. In the face of opposition and oppression. In societies where living in and talking of Christ risks more than a bit of awkwardness in a friendship.

The Church in the West needs more courage, to be healthy and to grow. So that’s why we’re having this series on courage over May and June. In June, we’ll look at the courage both to stand out and to stand up as Christians. Ken kicked off last week, looking at Joshua and Mark and the courage to go. Today we’ll be looking at the courage to stay from Ruth 1.

Staying isn’t always easy. Sometimes you just want to *get out*. I can think of a few gatherings I’ve been at - meetings, conferences, parties, and one particularly lengthy set of wedding speeches - where everything in me just wanted to go and be somewhere else. That impulse rises when we start to get uneasy.

When have you been at a gathering of people that you just wanted to get away from? (Church meetings are an acceptable answer, but not parties that people here have invited you to!)

It takes courage when God says, ‘Go! I am sending you into something new.’ But it also takes courage when God says, ‘Stay! I am calling you to remain where you are.’

Working in a tough job or voluntary role. Living in a tough community, because of social issues or how the neighbourhood relates to each other. Living in a tough marriage or other family relationship, where it feels lonely. It

could be tough being part of church where you're troubled by which way we're headed or how things are between us.

Tough lifestyles where things are not comfortable - because of how you live, how you work, or the responsibilities that have fallen on you. Just *living*, can be tough, when you reach a point of feeling that it might be better not to anymore.

Staying is tough. It takes courage. How do I know when staying isn't just an option to choose, but actually a call from God? And when God calls me to stay in something, how can I have the courage to do that?

Ruth is a story about having the courage to stay. At first glance it looks a lot like a story about going. In the midst of the many tragic events in Ruth 1, there's a lot of going. New places, new customs, new situations to get used to.

At the start of the chapter, Naomi and her family - husband Elimelech, and sons Mahlon and Kilion - they *go*. They leave their home town of Bethlehem, running from famine to the foreign land of Moab, where there are new people, a new culture, and gods other than The LORD being worshipped.

Added to this displacement as refugees, tragedy heaps upon tragedy. Elimelech dies. Then hope for the family rises as Naomi's boys marry local lasses, but it's dashed within ten years (but just one verse) - her boys die too, and without children. All that's left for Naomi is two in-laws, and no obvious hope on the horizon.

Then there's some more 'going'. In v.6, Naomi leaves Moab as she hears that God had brought back the provision of food to His people in Judah. She takes her daughters-in-law on the road. Now they are going into something new, something unknown where everything would feel unfamiliar. Recognising this, Naomi spends vv.8-15 trying to talk Orpah and Ruth out of this going with her.

But actually, this is a story about having the courage to stay. Let's learn from Naomi first of all. She returned to Bethlehem, knowing that she would settle back there for the rest of her life. v.19 tells us that the town was stirring with her arrival. Imagine what was stirring in her - as she trod the streets she'd once walked holding Elimelech's hand. As she gazed at the places her sons ran around as boys. Breathing in these things, with just the ghost of the memories of these men.

Here she would stay - here where it used to be so full, and now it felt so empty, (Naomi, v.20). How can Naomi find the courage to stay where it hurt to look around each day? She teaches us that you can't do this without expressing completely honestly what's going on inside. The pain of it. How she feels about what God has done with her life.

Look at vv.13 and 20-21. Naomi is *bitter*; she says so repeatedly. She's been poured out from full to empty. And she doesn't shy away from saying that it's God's fault. '*He* has emptied my life, *He* has opposed me, *He* has afflicted me and brought me misfortune.' She believes in God. She believes He is the only One in control. That's why she blames Him. That's why she needs to say these things, quite honestly.

If you're going to have the courage to stay where it hurts, tell God what you blame Him for. Better that than to ignore Him or pretend that some other force called bad luck or coincidence is more in control than He is. If you're going to have the courage to stay where it hurts, you can't bottle up your pain. Have the courage to pour out the grief. To lament what God has allowed. To let others hear it.

What do you want to say about God, to God? (Silent prayer)

Did you see this picture as a picture about *going*? Can you see how it's a picture about *staying*? Ruth teaches us the kind of staying worth being courageous about isn't to do with places, cultures or situations - it's to do with people. Courageous faithfulness to *people*.

Naomi spends vv.8-15 trying to convince Ruth to *stay* in Moab - the place and culture she's familiar with. But Ruth says in v.16, 'That wouldn't be staying... that would be *leaving*. I'd be *leaving* you.' For Ruth, to stay meant *staying* with the person she'd loved and invested in - and that was Naomi.

The courage to stay is about relationships - not geography or customs or organisations or traditions. Throughout this sermon, you'll probably be picturing circumstances in your life where the idea of 'staying' is a difficult one. Coming back to the questions we asked earlier... How do I know if staying is a choice, or if God is calling me to stay? How can I have the courage to stay?

Well - is the 'staying' about staying with people? Or is it an impersonal thing? Let me give you a minute to think about that...

Brief pause

Here's eight good reasons for Ruth *not* to stay with Naomi.

- 1) It will mean leaving behind everything that she knows, loves and is familiar with. She's permanently leaving her home country of Moab to live in a completely new town full of strangers for a future she can only imagine.
- 2) Everything about Ruth's experience of sharing life with Naomi and her family has been tragic and damaging. Marrying into a family telling stories of famine and bereavement, then losing her husband after only ten years of marriage, having no children, losing her brother-in-law too, and finally seeing his wife Orpah walk away. Ruth has got an out from this life of emotional baggage if she wants it.
- 3) Naomi doesn't want Ruth to stay with her! Of course Naomi is trying to look out for Ruth and Orpah in vv.8-15 in a 'you've got your whole lives ahead of you' sort of way. But Naomi's pretty firm with it. 'May the Lord show kindness to you...' in v.8 is a nice sentiment to share. But it was actually also a formal statement to end a relationship. Naomi was telling Ruth clearly, 'Our paths split here. God be with you, but off you go.'
- 4) Ruth's headed for a future shared with a woman so bitter that she wants people to name her that, and who is apparently ungrateful that Ruth chooses to stick with her. Look at vv.20-21. All Naomi can speak of is how God's taken everything away from her, never stopping to speak of what He's given her in Ruth. Ruth can look forward to living with bitterness and thanklessness.
- 5) If Ruth *leaves*, her prospects are *so* much brighter. She could re-marry. She could try for kids again. She could follow the dreams she once had. But if Ruth *stays* with Naomi, those prospects very likely go out the window. She would be knowingly giving everything up to look after an ageing, bitter old woman.
- 6) Ruth would be risking her life. Entering a dangerously vulnerable life as two widows without protection. Our society may be far from perfect when it comes to gender discrimination and pay gaps - but it's a world away from the culture Naomi and Ruth lived in, where women were basically treated as property, and not to have a man in the house was a life-

threatening prospect. Where would the income come from? The protection? The rights?

- 7) Ruth will face racist abuse and discrimination in her day to day life. She came from Moab. Moab and Israel had history. Ruth would be choosing to walk into something like the sectarianism many of us know of in parts of Scotland and Ireland, and she'd be the only one from the 'wrong' side of the divide.
- 8) The God she's going to live under hasn't had a great advert. When Ruth married into this family, she began to hear about this God called 'The LORD' ('Yahweh' in Hebrew). Her experience of this family following this God is that He let famine happen. He let three deaths amongst them happen. And the surviving worshipper, Naomi, keeps speaking of this God like He's an enemy who is set against her. Ruth would be choosing to share in a life placed in the hands of such a God.

There's eight good reasons for Ruth not to stay with Naomi. Maybe you can spot even more. Now we know from our reading that despite *all* of this, Ruth had the courage to stay. We'll look at why and how in a minute, but first of all, let me ask you this...

What makes it difficult to stay in relationships?

The root of Ruth's courage to stay, despite every difficulty, was love. Her love for Naomi. But love's such a fuzzy word, isn't it? Let's talk about what kind of love breeds the courage to stay.

It's a clinging love. In v.14, Ruth literally clings to Naomi - this is an embracing, unflinching, will-not-let-you-go, won't-be-pushed-away love. It's the same Hebrew word that's used of marriage in Genesis 2:24 - 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.' Leaving and cleaving.

A love that abandons treasured roots of the past, forsakes better prospects in the future, and commits absolutely to a person in the present. *That's* clinging love. It doesn't get steered by prospects at all. Remember, like Ruth, your prospects may be *way* better by not staying. But Ruth's story says, 'My prospects with you are incredibly poor, but my love for you is incredibly rich.'

It's a love that commits to a person or people in an 'all in' way. No fire exits. No safety nets, or bits of rope to pull you back if it gets too scary. It's a

strange mix of letting go here, and clinging tight there. Jumping in with abandon, and then planting feet firmly with commitment.

How boundless and how binding is Ruth's commitment in vv.16-17. It's boundless in space - 'Wherever you go I will go.' It's boundless in time - Ruth speaks of life and death and eternity in God's hands. It's binding in theology - 'I will worship The LORD as God, as He will be witness between us.' It's binding in destiny. 'My fate is bound up with yours.'

You might be picturing a myriad of things right now. It could be a person that your married to. (Marriage is definitely this kind of clinging love; and it's what you vowed when you did it). But it could be so many other things - after all, Ruth 1 isn't about a married couple.

A clinging love for... a child or another relative that you care for, or that you expect to. A community of people you live amongst. People that you work alongside. People that you work for - I don't mean the bosses that pay you, but the people whose lives are changed by the work you do. A family who love you, and want you around. A friend. Our church.

Sometimes, staying is just a choice you make. But when you have a clinging love in your heart, or when you've already vowed it, it is likely God is calling you to stay. And that clinging love is the root of the courage you'll need for it. So, if you're going to have a spine strong enough to stay, you need a heart full enough to cling. Where do you get *that* from? You get it from a soul sheltered by The LORD.

Ruth's life has changed. She grew up in a land where the God of the Bible was not people's god. They worshipped other gods - much like most people in our land do without realising it. But a family came into her life and introduced her to The LORD. Yahweh.

And for all the tragedy and pain He allowed, and for all Naomi blurted out about how The LORD had caused her harm - Ruth now believes that The LORD is God, and she'll put her life in His hands. As *her* God, v.16 says. As the witness and judge of her life, v.17 says. And, as another character in the story observes - as her soul's shelter.

By chapter 2, we meet Boaz, and for those who know the story, you'll know that it's going to get a lot happier. (Spoiler alert), Ruth's future husband observes what lies behind her courageous decision to stay with Naomi. In 2:12 he says this to Ruth: 'May The LORD repay you for what you have done.'

May you be richly rewarded by The LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.'

Ruth believes that whatever destiny there may be for her, it is in the hands of The LORD. And so she chooses to cling under His wing, before she can cling to others with love. To find that place of quiet shelter and trust with God makes everything else possible. Here's some coming-under-the-wing prayers, for now and for the future:

'Lord, I don't know what the future holds, but I place it in your hands. Your will be done.'

'Lord, I don't know what the future holds, but I know what I have committed to - with heart and vow. May you watch over me and call me to account should I go back on this.'

'Lord, I don't know what the future holds, but actually I expect it to be pretty stormy. Shelter me under your wing. I choose to run close to you and cling to you quietly for some time.'

A sheltered soul. Leads to a clinging heart. Leads to a spine strong enough to stay. And hey, who's to say that your courageous staying isn't going to lead to surprising blessings? It did in Ruth's story. If you don't know it, read on, and find out how God did amazing things through it.

And it did in Jesus' story too. Jesus who stayed in the garden and took the arrest, when everyone else ran. Jesus who stayed on the cross and took the blame, when He could have left it for us. Unflinching, embracing what should have been ours - all for a love that clings to us.

God Himself, in this and throughout the whole story of the Bible and of your life, has shown the courage to stay. God's story with us is, 'My prospects with you are incredibly poor - the eternal God experiencing sin, rejection and a cross - but my love for you is incredibly rich.' And the surprising blessings that have come from God's courageous staying have literally changed our lives forever.

Let's finish by coming back to some of those examples of places where it's hard to stay. The tough job... the tough family relationship... the tough community... the tough church!... the tough lifestyle... the tough life...

Is staying in these things a choice or a calling? Not all of these things have a Christian default of 'I will stay' - but some of them do. If you're not sure which is which, let's have a chat. Are there relationships that are part of your circumstances where there is a clinging love? That probably suggests a call to stay. Are you expectant about God bringing about surprising blessings through that?

I want to say that if staying in something is causing you harm, please talk to me or to a member of the Pastoral Care Team about that. Nobody walks alone here, and it's good to make sure you're not remaining in needless harm.

Whatever you're being called to have courage in - staying, going, standing out or standing up - take time in your days to deliberately seek shelter for your soul under The LORD's wing. Come and place everything in His hands, and rest under His arm. A sheltered soul. A clinging heart. A strong spine. Strong enough to stay.