

## **“Savor the Story”** *Introduction to the Book of Ruth*

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### **Introduction to Ruth:**

**We are starting a new sermon series this morning** called Living Above and Beyond – We are going to study the book of Ruth. **Why study the book of Ruth?** I mean of all the topics or books of the Bible – why Ruth? Why now? The simple answer is this – *because of love*. The book of Ruth is going to demonstrate for us the preeminent characteristic of the Christian life – Love. Our new banner says, “Faith, Hope and Love – but the greatest of these is Love.” Ruth does not teach about love didactically - it does not lecture us on love – but rather it shows us love – it demonstrates love – it gives us examples of love - examples that will take our breath away. If we can learn the lesson of love – as a new church – we will have understood the big picture – we will have understood the heart of God.

Love is our theme this Fall – it is our theme as we start Community Life small groups – the purpose of which is to develop loving community. We are studying Peacemaking in our adult Sunday School – so that we might model to one another the reconciling love of the gospel. Ruth is going to teach us of a deep love. A steadfast love. Loyal love. Love that goes above and beyond any expectation we might put on it. And this morning we want to begin with some rules of the road – some interpretive guidelines that will help us to appreciate this book over the coming weeks.

### **Introduction: WAR of the WORLDS**

It was the day before Halloween, October 30, 1938. Henry Brylawski was on his way to pick up his girlfriend at her apartment in Washington, D.C. As he turned on his car radio, the 25-year-old

law student heard some startling news. A huge meteorite had smashed into a New Jersey farm. New York was under attack by... Martians. Yes Martians – from the planet Mars! When he arrived at his girlfriend's home she was “quacking in boots.” She was convinced the attack was real.

In a recent interview with *National Geographic* magazine Brylawsky said that unlike his girlfriend - "I knew it was a hoax." *It was not real, of course.* What radio listeners heard that night was an adaptation, by 23-year-old Orson Welles and his Mercury Theater group, of a science fiction novel written 40 years earlier: *The War of the Worlds*, by H.G. Wells. However, the radio play, narrated by Orson Welles, had been written and performed to sound like a real news broadcast about an invasion from Mars.

Thousands of people panicked, believing they were under attack by Martians. Thousand calls came in to New York's police headquarters. Scores of adults required medical treatment for shock and hysteria. One history professor estimated that 6 million people heard the broadcast, and two million of them believed it was true. Why was there such confusion? Why did some believe and others not? The answer is simple – it was a confusion of genre. Was a person listening to real radio news or dramatized fiction? The choice between genre made all the different – *Same information – completely different interpretation.*

### **The Bible as Literature:**

A discussion about Genre is exactly where we need to start with the book of Ruth, because if we want to truly understand the message of the book we must be guided by the book's genre – as we take in information – we want to make correct interpretations.

But what do I mean by genre? Let me give you some examples from our day

Here are two books of two men – this is about David Brainerd and this is about Thomas Kent. Genre will play a big role in how you read these books. One book – Brainerd is a biography –

nonfiction – a real person - while the other is Christian fiction – a created story - written by our own Jim Pence. To miss the genre would be to miss the message of the authors. Here is another example – this is what? An encyclopedia – facts and figures presented in short articles – this is the comic page of today’s newspaper. Both contain words and information, but the genre will help us to interpret them correctly.

Now those examples are pretty easy for us to understand - it is easy to recognize the difference between comics and an encyclopedia. But when we open the Bible we are not so careful and the distinctions are not always as clear. The Bible is written in many different genres. And every genre has its own rules for interpretation. If we are to read Ruth correctly, or any other book of the Bible one of the first questions we must ask is what genre is it? For example, in the Bible we have books about: Poetry, Law Codes, Epistles – letters, Narrative literature, Wisdom literature and Apocalyptic literature.

We can make major mistakes in interpretation if we treat poetry as we would Paul’s letters. Or if we try to handle narrative stories as if they were proverbs.

So, what is the book of Ruth? The book of Ruth falls in the genre of narrative – it is a story. It is not a letter. It is not a collection poetry. It is a story. And I am stressing this point – the title of today’s message is “Savor the Story” – I want us to savor the story in the same way we would appreciate a fine work of art, or linger over an expensive meal, or sit in silent awe of a beautiful sunset.

And the book of Ruth is a beautiful and exquisite story. Listen to how it has been described by scholars as “The most beautiful of all novels – Goethe, a Delicious Story – LaCocque, Literary Artistry – Hubbard, Art and theological insight at its finest. “What a story! Reading it, studying it, never fails to yield something new and enchanting, robust and inspiring, sobering and compelling.” (Campell,p.3). Wow – I hope you are excited for the book of Ruth --

## Scripture:

With that background ringing as a bell around us - Let's read verse one.

Ruth 1:1 Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons.

Ok - Let's stop here – as we look at these two verses we need to be mindful of some typical parts of biblical narrative – or a Bible story There are five parts I want to draw to our attention this morning And to help us with this - Who has seen the movie, “*Finding Nemo?*” Finding Nemo won an Academic Award for the Best Animated Film In 2003. It is the most profitable cartoon in movie history both inside and outside of the US with worldwide ticket sales above 800 million dollar. When it came out on DVD it broke all records for DVD sales, in all categories. It sold more DVDs than Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter or Pirates of the Carribean. Why? It is a great story – it is a narrative.

**(1) The first thing we look for in a story is the setting.** Where does Finding Nemo take place? In the Ocean. In Australia. When? In modern times. The setting is key part of the story. The setting is nearly always the first thing given. When does the story take place? Where? What time? Look back at verse one - *What information does the narrator give us about the setting?*

**WHEN? Time of the judges** – Was this a good or a bad time? This was a time characterized by national upheaval – generally disobedience to God. It might be like saying in our day, that this story takes place during the civil war, or the great depression. That one piece of information sets the story in a difficult time.

**WHAT important event is driving the story - A famine in the land** – Another foreboding piece of information. Next we are told about a man – no name yet. The purpose of introducing a man is to tell us where he is from, which is from Bethlehem, in Judah.

**WHERE - They go to the land of Moab.** Now, we have our first serious interpretive decision – Was it a sin for the man to go to Moab because Moab was an enemy of Israel? Let's let the story inform us. Does the author give us indication it was wrong? Why do they go to Moab?

*Because they didn't have food.* I am amazed at how many commentaries argue that the only righteous thing to do was to stay in a land without food – that this was the only way trust in God would be demonstrated – to watch their family starve. We must be careful here. We need to be reminded that a famine is a horrible thing. This is a picture of a monument to the great famines in Ireland during the last century. What do we call people who are displaced because of natural disasters – famines, wars, floods? Remember Hurricane Katrina? We call those people refugees. So, let's not be too hard on the man and his family. They are refugees of a long lasting and far spreading famine. The storyteller sets his story against a particularly dark backdrop, a tragic backdrop. All this is from verse one.

**(2) A second part of a narrative / story is what is known as literary devices. Literary Devices** – These are things that the skillful author uses to make his points - such as suspense, irony and literary devices are like a yellow highlighters – pointing to important parts of the story – In Finding Nemo – some literary devices are irony – that a short-memory fish would be able to read and help, and role reversal where the dad is transformed from being overprotective at the beginning to confidence and trusting at the end.

We will see many literary devices in the book of Ruth. Let me point out one literary device we have in verse 1. There is a play on words that highlights the setting for us – There is a famine in

the land – and a certain man from Bethlehem. If we were Hebrew speakers, we would have smiled knowingly at this, but in English we don't see the connection. The famine means there is no food and the man is from Bethlehem – What does Bethlehem mean in Hebrew? *Beth* means house. *Lehem* means bread – House of bread, or house of food. There was no food in the house of food. It would be like a modern author saying there is no love in Philadelphia or there are no angels in Los Angeles. That is a literary technique, irony and a play of words – intentionally constructed by the author to emphasize the scope and severity of the famine.

**(3) Characters.** Two parts of a narrative that we will want to pay attention to are the setting and literary devices – next we have characters. Primary characters and secondary characters. Who are the main characters in Nemo? Nemo, Nemo's Dad, Dory. Who are secondary characters? The Whale, Shark, Pelecan. Look at verse two as the narrator introduces several characters.

Ruth 1:2 And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there.

Four names given – we don't know which ones will be important, but these are the ones we start with. Speaking of names, we will want to pay attention to the meaning of the names in the book of Ruth. I refer you to the cultural dictionary, where I have written on the importance of names in the Bible. Unlike today, in the Bible, a human name typically reflects character and mission anticipated in life.” Well...perhaps we see it sometimes today, such as the guy I heard on the radio – a parachute teacher – David Pancake, or the military surgeon, Dr. Error. He used to be a Major – Major Error. Two seminary professors at DTS are Dr. Pentecost, Dr. Toussaint. Some times names can be seen as a reflection of their life's work... Creflo Dollar, Jr – an Atlanta televangelist, known for his please for sending in donations – says - My last name is Dollar and so

I must know something about it.” -OR- Gerald Priest – He can rightly say -- “My daddy was a priest, my momma was a Priest, my brother was a Priest and I’m a priest.”

Well – what do the names mean that we have in the book of Ruth. Elimelech means “God is King” – would you say this leaves a positive or negative impression – positive. Naomi means “pleasant or lovely.” Now the boys names are somewhat unfortunate - Mahlon means “to be sick” and Chilion means to be frail. This may indicate that they were born as sick infants – perhaps even during as a result of the severe famine. Some people ask – are these real names or did the narrator make them up? There is no reason to take them as anything by real, “The common use of the names favor them as authentic family names rather than mere inventions.” (Hubbard).

**(4) We have talked about setting, literary devices and characters. The fourth part of a narrative story is the plot -** The plot tells us what the author wants to say to us, special problems and events. The plot is what drive the story forward and usually includes a big problem, which is resolved by the end of the story. What is the plot of Finding Nemo – Nemo is taken away and his father tries to find him – the story works toward resolution of the problems.

Let’s talk about the plot of the book of Ruth. We certainly have problems already – a famine and displaced family – but the two main problems of the book have not arrived yet - we will see them next week. *Ruth is a “problem based plot” – there is a problem that is examined and developed, leading toward a solution.* Problem based plots typically follow a similar outline – and this is the outline we are using for the book of Ruth. The structure is on the back of your handout.

First, there is an introduction to the story – the setting is established, characters are typically introduced. That is what we are looking at today. Next, the problem is given – this happens, typically, early in the narrative. Third, The problem, then usually is not resolved right away, but the

plot is developed through introduction of other problems or characters – things become more complicated. Then, at some point, there is a turning point – at last, it seems that something may work out to help the characters out of their problem. This doesn't mean that the problems are solved, but progress is made toward some results – turning in a positive direction. At last, the problems are resolved – It may or may not be a positive resolution. Finally, the story is concluded.

**(5) Setting, Literary devices, characters, a carefully constructed plot. Finally in biblical narrative we have to consider the role of the narrator** – In most good story, there is a narrator who gives the reader certain information. Here you might think of Winnie the Pooh instead of Finding Nemo – Where the main characters actually interact with the narrator.

Sometimes the narrator is right in front of us speaking – this is the case this morning in verses one and two – the narrator is speaking about the famine and the man and the names and the move to Moab. We have not yet heard anyone speak – no quotation marks. But we will - of the 85 verses in Ruth, 55 contain dialogue. We will want to pay attention to when does the story come to us through the narrator, and when through the characters.

Now. This is an important question. We have been using Finding Nemo to help us orient to a narrative – *What is the difference between the narrative “Finding Nemo” and the narrative – “the book of Ruth” from the Bible? Yes – the stories in the Bible are true. Remember this? – an encyclopedia – are the things in an encyclopedia true? Yes. Are they written as a story? No. The Bible gives us true information, like an encyclopedia, but it is written by skillful authors in a story format. What a beautiful thing it is for us to savor the story – the true stories of God. The particular story of Ruth!*

**Application:**

Here is our homework for this week -- - - - - Read through the book of Ruth several times  
Answer these questions – Why Ruth? Why for me? Why for our church? Read the cultural  
dictionary.

As we savor the story of Ruth, we are reminded that this story will point us to the Greatest  
story – A story with a tremendous problem – the problem of sin. A story where God brings a  
solution to the problem through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Let's close by singing that old hymn of  
the faith – *"I Love to Tell the Story."*