

Ruth 1:1-5

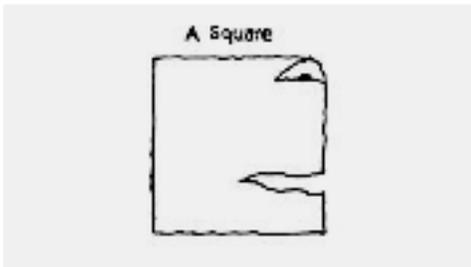
A Series of Unfortunate Events

Main idea: God works through the most difficult moments of our lives so that we might experience His grace.

I apologize in advance that my opening illustration will probably confuse almost everyone here. But if it does, I hope by the end of the sermon this morning, it might help you get at least just the smallest glimpse a greater world that's beyond comprehension.

There was a fun little book written in 1884 called "Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions." The book describes Flatland, which is a place that is entirely two dimensional. It's like living on a piece of paper, and not just living on it, but having a piece of paper be your entire universe, so that even you yourselves are entirely two dimensional. So things in Flatland have length and width, but no height, like a triangle or a square. In fact, that's the name of the main character of the book: A. Square.

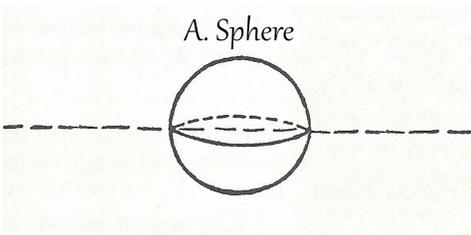
[Picture of A. Square]



Over half of the book simply attempts to describe life in Flatland, because it's a concept that's completely foreign to us. For example, if you were a resident of Flatland, called a Flatlander, and you were to look at a penny in Flatland, what do you think you'd see? You would never see a circle, but rather a line. In fact, in Flatland, you pretty much can only see lines everywhere you look, and you'd have to go all the way around an object to get an idea of it's actual shape.

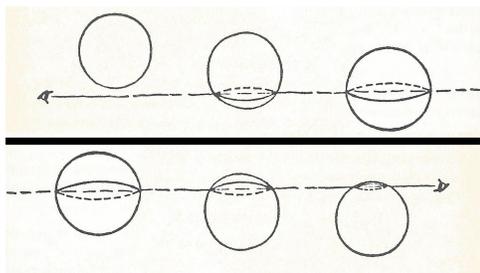
Well, the book gets more interesting when A. Square actually gets a visitor from the third dimension. At first, he hears a voice, like from heaven, and then it appears out of nowhere and then gets larger. A. Square moves around it and understands it to be a circle, but it's actually a sphere. In fact, that's his name: A. Sphere.

[Picture of A. Sphere]



You see, here's how it happened.

[Picture of A. Sphere passing through Flatland]



This is a timeline of events. First, A. Sphere was hovering above Flatland, represented by this line, and then A. Sphere began to pass through Flatland, so A. Square saw a dot appear out of nowhere, and then gradually get larger, until it then began to get smaller again, until it eventually just disappeared completely.

A. Sphere explained to A. Square what was happening, how he was a third dimensional being passing through the second dimension. At first A. Square was skeptical, but then he became intrigued, and when A. Square is able to actually visit the third dimension himself, he comes to see that Flatland is only a very crude representation of reality.

And one day, you see, our eyes will be opened to see just how crude of a reality we've been living in. We're like Flatlanders, who can't really comprehend what's outside of our little universe, and all the things we embrace as so important are merely a shadow of things to come, but the reality is in Christ.¹

Anyway, that was the opening illustration.

Well, I'm going to be preaching these next three months on the book of Ruth, and I'm calling it Ruth: A Romance of Many Dimensions. The book of Ruth has several layers to it. First, there's the straightforward love story of Ruth and Boaz. Second, there's the provision of God in David's (and Jesus's) lineage. And third, there are direct parallels to God's love and redemption of us.

So the book of Ruth is an interesting story in the Bible. It doesn't really seem to be about God, and yet it has all this stuff about a kinsman redeemer. And it doesn't really read like a love story, and yet it culminates in a wedding and even the birth of a child.

Most people who are maybe just a little familiar with the book of Ruth would probably say it's a heart-warming story about some of David's and Jesus's ancestors. But it's actually far more than that. That's only one dimension of it. In reality, it's the story of how each one of us was lost without a redeemer, without hope, and just when we needed Him most, God stepped into our story.

So let's begin reading it. Ruth chapter 1.

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 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. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about

¹ Colossians 2:17

ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:1-5)

Father, help us to trust You, even when everything seems hopeless. Help us to see Your hand at work through it all, so that we might rest and rejoice in Your sovereign goodness. In Jesus's name, Amen.

What we read about in the opening verses of the book of Ruth is a series of unfortunate events for a Jewish woman named Naomi. There's a famine. Then her husband dies. Then her sons marry Moabite women. Then her sons die. It was a series of unfortunate events.

So here's an important question for Naomi and for all of us: what do you do when you experience a series of unfortunate events, and everything in your life seems to be working against you?

Most people would probably say it's time to get serious. Put your game face on, and do your best to turn things around. Along those lines, you've probably heard it said, "God helps those who help themselves," which is actually nowhere in the Bible.

And what if you're beyond that, anyway? What if you're broken beyond repair, and all your family is gone, and there's literally nothing you can do to remedy that? That's the circumstance that Naomi was in.

So let's look at each of these things that Naomi and her family went through. First, there was a famine. If you read the first verse of Ruth carefully, you'll notice that the famine actually started before Elimelech moved his family to Moab. Verse 1.

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. (Ruth 1:1)

Evidently, Elimelech thought that he could provide for his family during a famine better by moving out of the place that God had given to the Israelites. Notice that all of this takes place in the days when the judges ruled in Israel. So this was after Moses led the people of Israel through the wilderness, and it was after Joshua had led them into the Promised Land, but it was before Israel had a king to rule over them like the nations around them. It was in the days of the judges, who were leaders appointed by God to rescue the Israelites both from their own sin and from the nations around them. If you read the book of Judges, you find this recurring theme:

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 17:6)

But the problem with people doing whatever is right in their own eyes is that everyone sees different things as right. In truth, there is only one right, but because of our sinfulness, we often disagree about what that is.² If you want to be faithful to God, then you'll seek not to do what's right in your own eyes, but what's right according to God's revealed word, the Bible.³

Anyway, we find in the book of Ruth that Elimelech, trying to provide for his family, did what was right in his own eyes, and moved his family to Moab during a famine.

² James 4:12

³ Psalm 119:1

But here's the problem with that: Moab was a pagan country. It was an enemy of the Israelite nation. The Moabites and Ammonites were descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, not through faithfulness, but through his daughter's incestual immorality. You can read the story in Genesis 19. So many people say that it was a compromise of his faith that caused Elimelech to move his family to Moab.

And yet, his name was Elimelech, which means, "My God is king." Ultimately, we don't know if Elimelech's move to Moab was right or wrong, because the text doesn't tell us, but either way, it's clear that even when we declare that "My God is king," things don't always go the way we planned.

Maybe you had great plans for your life, and tried to do everything by the book, and you just can't figure out how you ended up where you did. Or maybe you made more than a few compromises along the way. The truth is, we all have. We've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.⁴ We were all in the midst of a spiritual famine, precisely because all our lives, we've only ever done what was right in our own eyes instead of following God's plan for our lives.

Anyway, while living in Moab during a famine, this happened. Verse 3.

But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. (Ruth 1:3)

Elimelech took his family to Moab because he thought they could thrive there, but it was in that very place that he died. We're not told how he died, whether it was because of the famine, or because of some illness, but we can be reminded through this that no matter who you are or what you've done, we will all face the same end to this life. You might have built bigger and bigger barns to hold all your stuff, or you might have nothing but the shirt on your back, but either way, the wages of sin is death,⁵ and all of us have sinned.

Well, after Elimelech died, it says that Naomi was left with her two sons. And that doesn't sound so bad, because they could at least work and provide for her, right? Then we read verse 4:

These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. (Ruth 1:4a)

Now, we should all know that there's nothing wrong with marrying people of different nationalities or skin colors, and yet God had commanded the Israelites not to marry outside of the people of Israel because the surrounding nations all worshiped false gods, which were really no gods at all.⁶ So to take foreign wives meant they were straying from God. They were compromising their faith.

In the New Testament, we're never told not to marry people of other nations, because in Christ, we're made one nation, a nation of priests.⁷ And yet, Christians are to marry Christians, so that they would be able to encourage one another in the faith to worship God alone.⁸ So the principle behind the command is still in effect.

Some of you know all too well what it feels like to have children who have strayed from their faith. It's a pain deeper than any pit imaginable. I think Paul expressed it best when he wrote Romans 9:3, which says:

⁴ Romans 3:23

⁵ Romans 6:23

⁶ Deuteronomy 7:3-4, 23:3

⁷ 1 Peter 2:9

⁸ 2 Corinthians 6:14. While not specifically about marriage, it surely has implications for marriage. After all, shouldn't a married couple be able to have fellowship with one another?

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (Romans 9:3)

I think that's what Naomi was feeling, too. I think she wished that she was in hell. And then, to make matters worse, we continue reading in verse 4:

They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:4b-5)

Naomi moved to Moab with her two sons and husband, but ten years later, they had all died. It's interesting that the names of her sons, "Mahlon" and "Chilion," actually mean "sickly" and "wasted." It's like they're only mentioned in this story just to point out that sin leads to death.

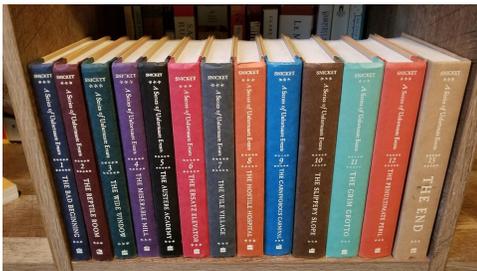
It's also interesting that by the end of verse 5, Naomi is just referred to as "the woman." It's like by this point, she had lost all of her identity as Elimelech's wife, mother of two, and even lost her own name which had meant "pleasant."

But the good news is that this wasn't the end of the story for Naomi. As we'll see as we continue studying the book of Ruth in the weeks to come, when Naomi thought she had nothing, it was through that very series of unfortunate events that the Savior would be born.

So what do you do when everything in your life seems to be working against you? You receive grace.

There's a series of books that my kids love that's actually called "A Series of Unfortunate Events."

[Picture of A Series of Unfortunate Events]



It's all about three siblings who go through the worst stuff. Their parents die in a fire. Their legal guardian wants to kill them and steal their inheritance. They get bounced around from home to home, and nothing seems to go right, until, in the very end, they are happy and free.

You see, God works through the most difficult moments of our lives so that we might experience His freedom and grace.

Think about what Paul went through. As a missionary, he was afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. And it was all so that he would experience and exhibit the life of Christ in him.⁹

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:8-11

Paul even wrote this in 2 Corinthians 4:17.

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. (2 Corinthians 4:17)

Paul considered being beaten, stoned with stones, shipwrecked, in danger from just about everyone, starving, and in prison all as light momentary affliction because he knew what glory awaited him in heaven.¹⁰ And it wasn't the streets of gold that he was looking forward to, but Jesus Himself. Knowing Jesus is worth far more than any suffering we might face in this life.

And all of this is also true of the cross. Jesus experienced the most pain and suffering of anyone, so that we would be the recipients of His grace.¹¹

Baptism is a symbol of this. When you get baptized, you're declaring, "My old self is dead! But my new self, by grace through faith in Jesus, is alive."¹²

You see, we've been talking a lot about death this morning, and we usually don't like to think about death, but death is only the first part of our story. After death, by grace through faith in Jesus,¹³ comes eternal life.

This week, I want to fill the baptistry back there full of water. Next Sunday is a day that our denomination has designated on the calendar as "Baptism Sunday," not because it's the only day people can be baptized, but simply to remind us all just how important baptism is. It's true that baptism doesn't save a person,¹⁴ and it's just a symbol, but it's a very important symbol.

J.D. Greear, the current president of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote that baptism is like a wedding ring. If you're getting married, and you get to the point of exchanging rings, and you say, "Oh, I'll marry you, sweetie, but I'm not going to wear that ring," you might start to doubt their sincerity in really wanting to be faithful to you.

Baptism is the same way. Without exception, every single baptism we read about in the New Testament immediately followed a person's coming to faith in Jesus.¹⁵ So don't put it off. Don't tell God, "God, I love you, but I won't wear the ring, I won't get baptized."

Maybe you don't understand much about Jesus. But maybe you hear a voice from heaven, not audibly, but in your heart, and you're just beginning to see Jesus, like he's passing through your three-dimensional world. I don't think we can fully comprehend just how awesome He is, and yet, one day we will know Him just as we are fully known.¹⁶

Maybe this morning, you'll tell me, "Pastor Chris, I don't understand it all, but I've trusted in Jesus but I've never gotten baptized, so I want to get baptized next week," or even "Pastor, I want to trust in Jesus right now for the first time, and get baptized next week."

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 11:24-27

¹¹ Hebrews 12:2

¹² 2 Corinthians 5:17, Colossians 2:12

¹³ Ephesians 2:8

¹⁴ 1 Peter 3:21

¹⁵ Acts 2:38-41, 8:35-38, 10:44-48, 16:32-33

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:12