

SHADOWLANDS 4: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH
RUTH 4
APRIL 24, 2016

There is a new TV show called, *Total Blackout*. Oddly enough, it is hosted by Jaleel White, better known as Steve Urkel from the TV show, *Family Matters*. Here is the simple premise of the show: they put contestants in a completely pitch-black room and make them endure various physical trials including touching unseen things and guessing what they could be. It sounds simple enough until you think about it. The producers include live animals and really gross stuff, so you could be touching a scorpion, a snake or raw meat. You can understand why people freak out. They know that scaring the contestants drives up ratings. They know that the producer of the show's goal is to scare and surprise them.

Here is the trailer for the first season, (FYI-includes the word hell...but we say that in church, so I think we can get a pass here.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR7erDDYvGg>

Unfortunately, there is a large portion of the population who view life like this. We are the unwitting contestants and God is the semi-deranged producer looking for ways to test us and scare us. If we are Christian, the language changes but the concept remains God is shaping us and molding us. He is sanctifying us with disease and pain, but it is still macabre. We are sitting there unwitting and waiting in the dark for what will happen next.

I understand how you could see that. Right off the bat, Adam and Eve have paradise only to get kicked out of the Garden of Eden. The whole world gets flooded. Abraham has to leave his hometown and family and endure decades of being childless. Joseph gets thrown in a hole then he gets thrown in prison. Moses goes from being a prince to a pauper only to spend 40 years in the desert. The Israelites spend 400 years in slavery and then 40 years in the desert.

And that's just the first two books of the Bible. That's before you get to them being conquered and exiled. That's before you get to a cycle of pain and loss. When you get to the New Testament, you have shipwrecks and snakebites. You have people getting stoned and imprisoned. You could be forgiven for thinking this life is mainly about suffering.

Which leads us to try and make sense of suffering and what happens to us in the darkness. As I told you in week two, Christians try to make sense of suffering in two ways. On one end of the spectrum, you have those who believe the Christian life should be all light and bright, and if darkness comes to your household in the form of disease, loss or strain, it is your fault for having some sort of sin in your life or not having enough faith to pray away the problem in your life. The other end of the spectrum is for those who wallow in suffering, almost as a gift from God, almost as something to be proud of. Joseph suffered. The Israelites suffered. Jesus suffered. The disciples suffered. Paul suffered. The Christian life is suffering. Deal with it.

Both of these views are problematic. The first because it makes God into a genie, and the second because it makes God a sadist. The first because Christians cannot handle pain, the second because they almost seek it out. The first because it assumes all of life is light, and the second because it assumes all life is darkness.

We are in the last week of our series, *Shadowlands*, as we explore the gray area of the world we live in. Taken from C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*, he uses *Shadowlands* to refer to this world we live in now. This side of heaven our world is full of ambiguities, light and darkness. There are days with laughing children and days with dying parents. There are days with full bank accounts and days of financial meltdowns. There are days of jogging through sunlit meadows and days of diseased bodies in darkened rooms. The question for the *Shadowlands* is, where is God? God is constantly portrayed as light, full of light, lighting our path, the light of the world, so the darkness makes us wonder if we are in the darkness and God is only light, then God must be absent. He must be mad at me again. He must be teaching me something. Or maybe he was never around.

It's hard to make sense of the darkness, so as we normally do, we rush to polarities. God is all light, so our lives should be all light. We should be blessed and healthy and happy, and if we are not, then we have done something wrong. Or, this world is a dark place and life is hard, and we just need to trudge through it so that one-day we can make it to heaven. The answer is not found in the extremes, it is found somewhere in between.

We prefer to systematize God and systematize any theological issue that is predictable with propositional truths and bullet points to be followed. This leads to the audacity of a whole field of study called Systematic Theology. It is meant to make God chartable, predictable and workable. That is true for suffering, either we avoid it or wallow in it. Either suffering has nothing to do with being a Christian or everything to do with being a Christian. Which one is it? Where is God to be found?

Ruth 4:1-4

Because the Promised Land belonged to the people of God, it was to remain in their hands. That means they never truly sold it. They could sell its usage. Since it was parceled out earlier, it was to remain within certain clans. Usage of it could grow and move, but it was supposed to revert during Jubilee years. For a season, one person could acquire more land and obtain more wealth. As a reminder from last week, if a husband died, then a brother was supposed to marry the widow, even if he already had a wife, in order to propagate his brother's name and further his lineage. In that process, he would gain some of his brother's property, but it wasn't really his because it would pass on to the new offspring.

Meanwhile, there would be a lot of cost. It would mean, having another wife and potentially more kids. That means financial cost, emotional cost to the existing family and not much gain, because the land would pass on to the heirs. The only real upside was the joy of honoring your lost relative and caring for someone in need. Here is another important note, if and when Ruth and Naomi died, this unnamed redeemer would automatically receive the land being spoken about. It would be deeded to him. All he needed to do was wait, no need to marry or mix up his family or complicate his estate, just wait.

I think that is exactly what this man was doing, waiting and not helping. Ruth 1:19 tells us Naomi returned and the whole small town was stirred. News spread that Naomi was back as a widow with no sons and her widowed daughter-in-law, two powerless women with no one to care for them. He knew, and he chose to wait. He chose to do nothing. If you think I am being too hard on him or reading too much into it, let's read what happens next.

Ruth 4:5

This is what you call a contract rider or seller's addendum. As it was, the deal was you would like to acquire more land. Get richer? Have more? You bet!!! Oh and one more thing... you get a childless widow from a foreign land!

I am assuming you have heard about the riders that big name musicians attach to their contracts. In one sense, you have a contract that stipulates you will play at the SAP Center on such and such a date for this many million dollars. You will configure the stage this way, the lighting and sound technicians will make it look and sound like this. All of those dollar and sense logistics are hard to work out with the busy scheduling of these venues and artists. So the concert gets booked and the artist says, "Oh yeah, by the way, I will need a few extra things." In 1982, Van Halen required a big bowl of M&Ms with all of the brown ones taken out. Jennifer Lopez demands white chairs, white curtains and white flowers in her green room. Mary J. Blige requires a brand new toilet seat be installed prior to her visit. Paul McCartney, a noted vegan, will not be picked up in a car with leather seats and he will not go into a dressing room with any leather products.

Boaz adds the ultimate contract rider. This unnamed man works it out in his brain that he can pay for this land and make some money off of it. Then Boaz throws in a widowed childless Moabite. This person is outside of the family of God, she will be expecting a child and she will expect you to be a husband to her. Which is a tall order for someone who isn't married let alone someone who is. Being a blended family where you are working hard not

to replace but to at least step in as a stepmother is hard. Imagine this with two wives. Imagine how the estate gets handled. Needless to say, it would be messy.

Ruth 4:6

This man gets put in a dark room and takes a feel of the situation. He says yes, until he gets a hold of it. Too messy. Too much danger. This will complicate my estate and my life.

That is when Boaz steps in to show hesed, to expose himself to heartache, to expose himself to someone who could hurt his heart and his estate. Be clear here, in everyone's mind the key thing here was the estate, not the woman. Except for Boaz. The land? Who cares? The woman was everything to him. So this woman that everyone else had looked past as a liability, Boaz redeems her.

These two men saw the same situation and had completely different responses. This unnamed guardian redeemer sees responsibility, work and complexity, and he makes an effort to avoid it. Boaz sees love but also the complexity of a relationship, a divided inheritance, a new way of life and he leans into it. They both saw the same thing and came to completely different solutions.

Now let me ask you a question today. Who caused Ruth's suffering? That is a complex question. What caused there to be a famine in the land? A natural rhythm of the earth's seasons? Manmade overworking of the land? Pestilence? What killed her husband? Bad decisions? Disease? Theologically speaking, more than a few Israelites would have attributed her suffering to her own causation from sin or from just being a religious outsider.

If you asked ten different people about Ruth's suffering, you would have gotten 11 different answers. The unnamed guardian redeemer saw more trouble than it was worth, but Boaz did something different. He chose the way of hesed. Grace. Here is a big idea for you when it comes to suffering. We spend a great deal of time worrying about when it may come and

when it arrives, our first reaction is a rush to forensics. What caused this? Why did this occur? Who is responsible?

The shift here as we stumble through dark places is to start and end with *hesed*, the grace we show to others and the grace we are willing to receive, because we live in such a messy world. You can try to figure out suffering, but the crazy thing is, if you can figure out where the suffering came from, 1) you are probably wrong. 2) Even if you think you have figured it out, it will give you no comfort. What if we moved instead towards *hesed* mode?

Any time there is an opportunity to show grace to those who suffer, take it. This means show up on a doorstep with a meal. This means pulling over to the side of the road for those in need. This means intentionally serving in places of great pain and injustice. This means learning to say you are sorry. This means being willing to forgive.

Here is the reason why, when your paradigm shifts from “why” suffering to “what now” suffering, your entire worldview will change. When you move past the forensics approach to suffering, to there is suffering and I will do something about it, everything changes. That reflects something about you and the God we serve. If you truly think we have a good father, then suffering will bother you so much so that you will never be okay with suffering in this world. You won't spend time agonizing about the why or the what-ifs and you will move into action. Jesus, when teaching his disciples how to pray, said this:

Luke 11:10-15

He is the giver of all good gifts. He then heals someone and people attribute it to demonic powers. There is nothing new about confusion around suffering and the nature of God. Jesus eliminates this equivocation. While disease or broken relationships may come to your life, these are not from God. They are byproducts of the broken world that we live in. We have a messy world where people hurt people intentionally and unintentionally. Individual and corporate sins are not things that hurt God's feelings, they are destructive and corrosive actions that break others and break the world around us.

So, we might try and figure out what or who caused suffering, but it is ultimately meaningless. Be assured of this, God is the author of life not death. He is the giver of good gifts not bad ones. He seeks abundant not a shriveled life for you. Yet sometimes, many times, bad things do happen. The shift today is a move towards hesed.

This was in the DNA of the clan of Perez, Judah and Tamar from Genesis 38. Judah, the father of three sons, watched two of his sons die as each of them married Tamar in hopes of bearing children and continuing the family line. Tamar's first husband, Er, died and in the tradition of levirate marriage, she was married to the next brother Onan. For selfish reasons, Onan creatively avoided producing children with Tamar as a means of shirking his responsibility. Onan dies as well and Tamar is left waiting for the next brother to become old enough for her to marry.

The third brother becomes old enough for marriage, but a fearful Judah avoids giving this son to be married to Tamar. This widow decides to take matters into her own hands and furtively approaches Judah, masked as a prostitute, while he is out of town. Judah becomes one of the first johns in the Bible, sleeping with Tamar and subsequently impregnating her. Later, it is found out that Tamar is pregnant via prostitution and Judah calls for punishment in the form of death because of her dishonor. At this time, Tamar exposes Judah as the father of this child, and in a moment of true contrition, he confesses his sinful unworthiness.

This story has it all, sex, secrets, more sex, public embarrassment, prostitution and lies. This is the twisted family tree of Jesus. You know when we hear Jesus referred to as the Lion from the tribe of Judah, this is Judah. A man who wouldn't obey God's law by caring for this widow by giving her the next son in line to care for and carry on his son's name. On top of that, he visits a cult prostitute (or so he thinks) and then tries to cover his tracks.

Ultimately they have a son named Perez. You could try and figure out who caused the suffering in that story, but it would take you weeks with a flow chart to map it all out. What

killed Er? Was it an unhealthy sinful lifestyle, who knows? What made Onan decide to shirk his responsibilities? Why wouldn't Judah give his youngest son to this widow-maker of a lady? Why did Tamar dress up like a prostitute to sleep with her father-in-law? Why did Judah act holier than thou and almost kill his widowed daughter-in-law?

Pick one of these threads to pull on and you might come up with some answers, but probably not. Heseed prevails. The only way to conquer suffering is not by understanding it but by counteracting it with heseed, with grace.

This is how God deals with us. This is how Jesus deals with us. The crowds push in and question his authority, he feeds them. People get healed and don't come back to thank him, he heals them anyway. Jesus gets pushed to the brink of a cliff, he speaks love. Jesus gets betrayed and he still washes feet. Jesus gets falsely accused and crucified and he says, "Father forgive them."

We spend a lot of time trying to figure out the specifics of why Jesus suffered, and it is easy to miss his response to suffering. He says to the father, "Not my will but yours be done." He then commits to heseed wherever he can produce it. That's the only way you can respond to suffering in this world. Suffering rarely makes sense. We use all of our emotions for why and who to blame instead of moving towards this idea of showing grace and receiving grace.

Some of you today have relationships in tatters not because suffering happened but because maybe one or both of you is still stuck on *why* instead of *now what*. Some of you today have a loved one with a diseased body and days and months are being lost obsessing over *why* instead of enjoying the life you have by saying, "*Now what?*"

The story of Ruth spends little time on *why* and keeps moving towards *now what*. There isn't time spent on why Ruth became a widow, but time is spent on the now what as she sticks by her mother-in-law. There isn't time spent on why they are poor and barely making it, but instead on the now what of gleaning in the fields. The genius of the TV show

Total Blackout is they paralyze you with questions. You're so afraid it is a porcupine you can't believe it might just be a pineapple. You're so worried that it might bite you that you never touch it. Never mind that if you really thought about it, you would realize that no billion dollar television company would allow you to do or touch anything that would truly hurt you.

If you can grasp and believe the idea that God loves you deeply and that he is for you, it will change your *whys* into *what now*. You will move towards being an agent of *hesed* rather than an agent of fear.