

SHADOWLANDS: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

RUTH 1:1-18

APRIL 3, 2016

<http://news.vanderbilt.edu/2013/10/dark-brain-sees/>

Can you see in the dark? Only about half of all humans can see in the dark. When everyone else sees nothing, these people are still tracking. For the next four weeks, I want to invite you to learn to see in the dark. This is an important skill to have because darkness will come. It always does.

We live in a dark world. Yes, there is light in the form of healthy bodies, light in great food and plenty of it, light in full bank accounts and wonderful unity in families. But there is also darkness, and it comes for all of us at some point or another. Our worlds grow dark when disease comes knocking on our door. Our life gets dim when financial ruin is lurking in the back round. The shadows emerge when relationships are strained and families are broken. The darkness happens. It just does. The question remains the same, "Can you see in the dark?"

I am fully convinced that one of the number one reasons people walk away from God is because they are unable to see in the dark. When pain and suffering darkens their lives, they are unable to see God. God who purports to be the light of the world. God who purports to have no darkness in him. In him with whom there are no shadows and no darkness. When darkness comes, you are left wondering, did God leave? Is he mad at me? Did he ever really love me? Does he even care? Or if you are really honest, does God even exist?

Someone who asked these types of questions was C.S. Lewis. Lewis wrote often about God and suffering and then had to live through it. Later in life, Lewis met and eventually married a woman named Joy Gresham. She was an author and a single mother to two boys. Early in their marriage, Joy became sick and soon died from cancer. This episode was soul

crushing for Lewis. The darkness came. For so long, Lewis had so eloquently turned on the light for others. He had shown people God through the portal to Narnia and then meaningful memoirs about his own journey to faith. Now when the lights went off, he had a hard time seeing. He wasn't so sure God was still there.

The story of Lewis and Gresham's romance was portrayed in a movie called *Shadowlands*. The title is taken from a quote from the Last Battle in the Narnia books:

'There was a real railway accident,' said Aslan softly. 'Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is over: this is the morning.'

Aslan, the Christ character, is telling the children that they are now in heaven. What is interesting, for our purposes, is that he refers to this life, our world, as the Shadowlands. What a perfect picture. Some light. Some darkness. Plenty of shadows and a little gray area. For four weeks, we will be studying the book of Ruth in a series titled "Shadowlands." My main goal is to help you see in the dark, because here is a little secret for you today, God does some of his best work in the dark. When you can't see him, he is actually quite diligently at work. When he feels far away, it might be the nearest he has been. God does some of his best work in the dark, and I want to help you see him there.

The book of Ruth is a short four chapters. It's a story about loss, loyalty and redemption. It's a story about how God expects families to get along, and it's really a story about a woman and her mother-in-law. Before we get any further into this deep subject, let's go ahead and get the mother-in-law joke out of the way.

So David is finally engaged, and is excited to show off his new bride. "Ma", he said to his mother, "I'm going to bring home three girls, and I want you to guess which one is my fiancé." Sure enough twenty minutes later, David walks in the door with three girls following behind him. "It's that one," said his mother without blinking an eye. "Holy cow," exclaimed David. "How in the world did you know it was her?" "I just don't like her," she replied.

The most difficult dynamics of in-law relationships is not mother-in-law with the son-in-law but the mother-in-law with the daughter-in-law. There is often strife in this dynamic because the latent questions of power regarding who is the mother now? Questions about how his mom used to do it versus how you do it? Questions as profound as parenting philosophies and discipline to the trivial of how much flour goes in the holiday recipe. These are all loaded questions that make this dynamic all the more difficult.

These two women are about to enter the darkness, and only one of them can see in the dark.

Ruth 1:1-7

For those of you who are new here, this first verse might not have much meaning for you, but for those of you that call SFC home, you know that the statement “in the day when the Judges ruled” is not merely a historical marker. Before Easter, our church studied the book of Judges for several weeks, and it was an extremely dark period of about 400 years. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes, and the nation of Israel sunk lower and lower into sin and idolatry. So this is a spiritually dark time when most people are giving no thought to God’s design for life especially not for how you treat one another. Everyone is kind of doing their own thing, looking primarily after themselves, feeding their own appetites. On top of all that, there is a famine.

Famines are kind of a difficult thing to wrap your brain around in 21st century western civilization, especially where we live. A few of us have known hunger, but most of us have really only known stomach growls because our meeting has gone long. Or we have known the pain of the grocery store being out of our favorite cereal. But famine, I am guessing none of us ever have or ever will know it. In this time period, a famine could end a whole people group. Two bad harvest seasons could be something you never return from. There is also a great irony in the beginning of this story; Elimelech and Naomi are from Bethlehem. What does the name Bethlehem mean? House of bread. This is a perfect irony on the state

of this nation, and a foreshadowing of the difficult days ahead for this family, spiritual and physical famine.

In this story, an Israelite man named Elimelech moves his family out of the Promised Land to find food. He moves them to a foreign pagan land called Moab. The famine claims its first victim and Elimelech dies. The patriarch is dead. The good news for this family is that Naomi has two sons and each takes a wife. I have told you this many times before but in this culture, a woman was always tethered to the men in her life. When she was a young girl, she was protected and cared for by her father. Then she became married and she was protected and cared for by her husband. If her husband died, the widow could still have hope because her sons would protect her and care for. But if her father, husband and sons died without any grandchildren or extended family to take care of her, she was in real trouble.

For the most part in this culture, women did not own property or have jobs outside of the house, so making a living was very hard for a woman who did not have a man in her life. And it was extremely hard if it was the middle of a famine. This is where Naomi finds herself, her husband dies, but there is still hope because she has two sons. Those sons marry Ruth and Orpah. The famine then claims two more victims as both of the sons die. No children are produced. We are left with three women who have no men in their life in the middle of a famine. In a bit, Naomi will return to her hometown of Bethlehem, and people are shocked by her appearance. She is probably gaunt and aged beyond her years because of the great loss she has endured. People say, "Is this Naomi?" She answers, "Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara." Naomi means sweet. Mara means bitter. She says call me Mara because God has made my life very bitter.

That sounds dark to me. That sounds like a rock and a hard place to me. Ruth is the one really feeling the squeeze; she is not just sandwiched between a mother-in-law and her kids. It is something worse in this culture. She is sandwiched between a bitter mother-in-law and having no kids. Having a child was everything to women in this culture. You'll understand this conundrum more as we keep reading.

Ruth 1:8-14

Naomi tells her daughter-in-laws to go look for another husband. I want you to understand the weight of this statement. If Ruth and Orpah find new husbands, it means they will have new mother-in-laws and there would be no place for Naomi. As a woman passed the age of her childbearing years, in the middle of a famine, there would be no one interested in marrying her. They didn't marry primarily for love or companionship but rather establishing and building families. A woman past her childbearing years in the midst of the famine was not an asset but a liability, just another mouth to feed. When Naomi sent these girls off, she was not only resigning herself to a lonely existence as she lost these two girls. She was resigning herself to a very certain and quick death. She could beg, but that doesn't yield much in the midst of a famine. She would probably starve. Alone. This is a selfless and profound statement, "Go find new husbands."

Emotions would make this hard for Ruth and Orpah to agree to but ultimately according to common sense, they had to go. Stay here with a bitter mother-in-law or go start a new life? A sweet life of marriage and children. This is good common sense. Leave the mess and get a new start. Both daughters do the obligatory, "Oh, we could never do that." Then Naomi explains to them that she is of no value to them and she can't practically help them. She is a liability not an asset. After that real world explanation, Orpah exercises common sense and agrees to leave, but Ruth won't go. She sees the sweet life, but for some reason she stays. The darkness is closing in yet she can see something? How does a woman stuck between a bitter mother-in-law and the fear of never having kids stick around?

Have you ever had someone tell you, "I used to change your diapers." Sometimes moms say it to kids when they are getting older and too big for their britches. Sometimes grandparents say as a bit of nostalgia when a child is grown up and heading off to college. I never really understood why people say this phrase. Couldn't you just say, "I was there when you were young"? Or, "I cared for you when you were a baby." Why specifically the phrase, "I used to change your diapers." I never understood this until I had kids. There is

nothing else like this task. It can be messy, nauseating and scary all at once. Occasionally, “diapermageddon” happens and clothes must be changed, babies must be washed in addition to changing the diaper. It is the worst. “I used to change your diaper,” means I have seen your worst, and I am still here. I know the type of mess you can make and I am still here. I still love you.

Ruth has seen this woman at her worst. Naomi is now self-proclaimed as a bitter woman. With good reason, she probably never smiles, regularly complains and often mopes. But Ruth sticks around.

Ruth 1:15-18

Ruth doesn’t leave, so Naomi, tries to appeal to her common sense again. Go back home. Go find a sweet life. Go towards the light. There is still a chance for you to be happy, and then Ruth says those profound words, “Don’t tell me to leave because I won’t. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die. Bitter or sweet, I am with you. Light or darkness, I am with you. I have seen your worst and I am still here.”

What can Ruth see that we can’t? It seems like she can see something in the dark. You can only see in the dark when you practice uncommon sense. You submit to the counterintuitive way of grace. Common sense says Ruth should have left. She should have sought the sweet life of a new husband and hopefully kids, but she practiced uncommon sense. For ten years, this outsider was slowly introduced to the way of grace, the God of Israel. For ten years, she heard the stories of Abraham, Joseph and Moses. She heard about the Passover and the Exodus. She heard about a God that regularly said, “I have seen your worst, and I am sticking around. I have seen the mess you made, I am sticking around.” For ten years, she was exposed to this God, and we know she was a convert because she said, “Your God will be my God.” She decided to take him seriously and practice uncommon sense.

Ruth knew that the God of Israel would not leave a widow to die, so she decided to do the

same. She chose the counterintuitive way of God over her own. She chose obedience and sacrifice. Here is the great thing about this story, these women stick together and God works a miracle. Through a series of events, Ruth meets and marries a man named Boaz. Against all odds, this woman received great blessings. Not only was she married but she had a child.

The allure of uncommon sense is that God's best is always better than yours. We often seek out the sweet life with common sense. The great irony is it is often bland if not bitter. Counterintuitive though it may be, God's best is always better than yours. The tricky thing is that God's best often traverses the path of uncommon sense. It is great to read the book of Ruth with hindsight and see that she had a happy ending, but put yourself in her shoes, not knowing a new home, a new husband and a new baby were in her future. All she could see for sure was starvation and a bitter companion, but she served a God who set an uncommon example. Love all including those whom world considers liabilities not assets. Love those who can give you nothing in return. Stick around even when you have seen their worst. Stick around even after seeing the type of mess they have made because that is how God loves you and me.

Ruth's son with Boaz was named Obed. Obed had a son named Jesse, and the last son of Jesse was named David. David would become a king. He made more than a few messes, some of them huge, and God stuck around. I think David realized God's great uncommon grace and it changed him because in one amazing story of counterintuitive grace, David cares for a disabled son of Jonathan named Mephibosheth. He gives him land, protects him and seats him at the king's table. This was a liability. He had nothing to offer, but the king sacrificed for him anyway. The king stuck by him anyway.

As it turns out, this principle must have run in the family because David had a descendant who was born in Bethlehem. He was the son of a carpenter, and he said something profound, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you." The "these" things he was referring to were not items like money, clothes and food. All the things we are often told are associated with the sweet life. Jesus said, practice uncommon

sense and pursue the kingdom. Just like his great, great, great, great, great grandmother practiced. She chose to care for a widow before seeking a husband for herself and God gave her the sweet life. Jesus not only said this, but he practiced it. The sweet life for Jesus would have been living a long full life and not persecuted, humiliated and crucified. But he sought the kingdom first to advance God's cause, to make a way back for us into our Maker's presence. God saw us at our worst and he stuck around. The Bible says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." He saw us at our worst and he came anyway.

Some of you are in the darkness today, unsure of which way to turn. I want to remind you that God does some of his best work in the darkness. You just have to look for him. I kind of fibbed when I told you I would teach you to see in the dark. I read about something recently that I had experienced often but just never had a name for. It is dark adaptation. Think of a time when you go from a bright setting like outside and walk right into a movie theater. Everything seems completely dark, but as time passes, you can start to see. Your cones and your receptors are calibrating. You haven't learned to see in the dark, you have just become more sensitive to the light. You can find light even in dark places. Wherever you are today, that's what I want for you!