

SHADOWLANDS 2: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH
RUTH 2
APRIL 10, 2016

I want to start with a simple question today, “Why did pirates wear eye patches?” Do you know what I am talking about? When I ask you to picture a pirate, I am guessing your mind quickly constructs a grimy man with long hair, a sword in hand and a patch over his eye. So, why did pirates wear eye patches? You can say, “Well, Gabe, that is obvious. They wore an eye patch because they lost that eye. Just like they sometimes have wooden peg legs and hooks for hands. A pirate’s life ain’t easy. Shivering the timbers, sailing the seas and fighting sailors leads to loss of life and limb and sometimes you lose an eye.”

That is what I thought, but the experts say that is wrong. Experts believe the eye patch was for practical reasons, not aesthetic ones. That makes sense; wooden legs and hook hands are functional. What does a pirate care about aesthetics? No, it was practical. So why did pirates wear eye patches? To help them see in the dark. Pirates would spend a large amount of time above deck in sunny bright conditions. If these pirates needed to go quickly below deck to make ready for battle, they would switch the eye patch from one eye to the other.

This takes advantage of the concept I introduced to you last week, dark adaptation. Dark adaptation is your ability to see in the dark. You know the feeling when you go from the bright outdoors into a pitch-black room, it takes a few minutes, but eventually in a room where you could see nothing, your eyes soon adapt. Your cones and receptors become more sensitive to the light, and you can find light even in dark places. Thus you can “see” in the dark.

Pirates took advantage of dark adaptation by always being ready to switch from one eye to the other. To this day, nighttime survivalists, military experts and even commercial pilots will take advantage of this concept. The FAA encourages pilots in a dark cockpit to close

one eye if they ever have to turn on the lights. This preserves their night vision and does not require them to readjust through dark adaptation.

Why in the world are we talking about pilots, pirates, eyes and darkness? Last week, I introduced our new series, Shadowlands. For four weeks, we are studying the book of Ruth and learning to see in the dark. By that, we mean the darkness of suffering. We live in a world full of beautiful light and life with babies, plenty of food, strong families and grand provision. But we also live in a world of ever encroaching darkness. We lose children and loved ones and things grow dark. Finances are drained and the shadows grow tall. Disease slips in and relationships are fractured and the light quickly dims. We live in a world of light, but there is plenty of suffering and ever encroaching darkness.

So, the real question is, can you see in the dark? When suffering comes, and it will, when darkness surrounds, and it will, can you see in the dark? The Bible is full of imagery that says God is light. Jesus is the light of the world. In God there is no darkness or shadows. God's word is a lamp unto our feet. When darkness comes, we are forced to wonder, where did God go? If God is light and I am in the dark, where did God go? Is he mad at me? Did he turn off the lights to punish me? Am I alone? Was God ever here?

I believe the number one reason that people don't have faith or have it and lose it is when their world goes dark. My hope for this series is to help you see in the dark. My singular refrain for you is that God does some of his best work in the dark. Whether it be in times of refinement in the darkness of the wilderness or whether it be strengthening and revival in the exile, or even, the literal darkness in the aftermath of Jesus' death. God does some of his best work in the darkness. When things seem bleak and God seems distant, that is when he is often closest and his work is greatest. We just have to see him.

We are calling this series "Shadowlands" based on the concept from C.S. Lewis. In his book, *The Last Battle*, he refers to this world as the shadowlands. In the same way that Paul says we currently see through a glass dimly, like looking in a smoky mirror in a dark room. So

too does C.S. Lewis call this life, the shadowlands, a place of light and dark, a place of gray and tall shadows. How do we navigate such a world? How do we see in the dark?

Ruth 2: 1-3

Just as a recap for you from Ruth chapter 1, Ruth and Naomi are together because darkness has brought them together. Before there was Ruth, there was just Naomi and Elimelech and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. This family of four left Israel during the chaotic time of the judges because there was a famine in the land. We delved deeper into this last week, but this family from the house of bread, Bethlehem, is living during a time of spiritual and physical famine, so they go to Moab in search of food.

During this desperate season, things only grow worse. The patriarch, Elimelech, dies. Naomi's two sons marry two women from Moab named Ruth and Orpah. For ten years they live together as family and then the two sons, the two husbands, die. Without grandchildren or husbands, these three women quickly become some of the most vulnerable and powerless characters in the Bible. Women were tethered to the men in their life during this era. To be without a man, be it a father, husband or adult male child, was a dangerous place to be. You had few rights and little protection. You were vulnerable and powerless, easy targets to be taken advantage of in many ways. Especially during a famine when people are on edge, prone to anger and quick to make bad decisions.

As we studied last week, Naomi tells her two daughters-in-law to go seek out new husbands. Remember after all of these events, Naomi looks at her darkened life and says call me Mara don't call me Naomi. Naomi means sweet. Mara means bitter. Don't call my life sweet for God has dealt with me harshly and made my life bitter. "Old bitter" plans to go back to Judah because there is word that food may be growing again and the famine may be over. But before she goes, she tells her daughters-in-law to go and seek new husbands, to go and pursue a sweet life. She will continue on the bitter and dangerous path back to her own country. Hopefully, she makes it there safely and maybe she can peek out a continued but bitter existence.

Orpah takes her up on the offer, but Ruth stays. So these two women go but with a role reversal. Ruth is now the outsider, a pagan woman, a convert to Judaism going to a land that is not her home under difficult and dark circumstances. That is where our story picks up today. Ruth goes to work. It says she goes to glean in the fields. She did this because of a provision found in Deuteronomy 24:19-22.

Deuteronomy 24: 19-22

This was God's plan to provide for the orphan, foreigner and the widow. It was a way to work with dignity and be provided for. Those with fields were told to not clean your plate. This is a very un-American thing to do, but without combines and complex farm machinery, some of the crops were not picked clean, others were dropped. Instead of doubling back to maximize profit, you were told to leave some on the margin for the margin.

Don't clean your plate. Don't pick up every last crumb. Leave some for the poor and powerless. Like manna from heaven, may they stumble upon food on the ground. When they enter the promised land, may they know what kind of God I am by what kind of people I have, those that leave something behind for those in dark places, those that leave margin for people on the margin. Boaz is just such a man.

Ruth 2: 4-10

Boaz is the prosperous landowner who comes to check on his property. He sees this young unknown woman gleaning in his field. He finds out she is a foreign widow. She is a pagan woman, not even a fellow Jew.

Now think about this for just a minute. The entire region has just come out of a massive famine. They are on the road to recovery, and you have to guess the prevailing mindset is to be overly cautious and conservative and to not waste any grain and definitely not leave any on the ground.

You remember in the boon days of the early aughts leading up to 2007? Things were booming and the markets were bullish. People were investing and leveraging everything they had. This actually led the US population to have a negative savings rate. So not only were people not saving any money for a rainy day, they were so leveraged that they were spending more than they were making. Well, you know how that story continues; the 2008 collapse takes place. Now in the last few years, as the market and economy have returned, people have started to save money. So much so that some analysts believe for quite a while that people were overcompensating, not only saving but hoarding. Refusing to use their cash for fear of another 2008.

That's probably how it felt in this time with Boaz. A decade long famine left everyone in the dark and on the brink of ruin, but now the market was flowing again. The rain had returned, and they could see the light. If I were Boaz, I would be picking up every grain on the ground. I would be cleaning my plate and keeping every morsel to take for myself and my needs.

On top of the economics, you have to know Boaz was human just like you and I. While this was a biblical law, you have to know it made people uneasy and uncomfortable. A landowner or farmer would buy the land, buy the seed, work the land and pay for labor. The farmer would pray for rain and stay up late worrying about enemies. After several months, God willing, after all of that hard work, there would be a payoff. You have to imagine it was a hard pill to swallow leaving some on the ground. Orphans and widows make sense, but you have to think there were also some ne-er-do-wells, some bums who just didn't want to work, and they would take advantage of the law and use it to their benefit.

You know that feeling when you worked hard through school, then hard to get a job, then to get where you are in a job, then to work 60 hours a week and pay half of your wages to the government and still have people asking for your money. Some may be real needs, but you really wonder, are these people just gaming the system? Why should I go above and way beyond to help people? It's a hard pill to swallow.

You know how Boaz must feel. But for some reason, he leaves margin for the margin people. In fact, he takes it one step further and he tells her to keep coming back. The idea is that she could glean and move on and allow another neighbor to help pay for this woman, but he tells her to come back and take as much as she can. Not only that, he is going to offer her protection and food and water later on. What in the world is going on? I think Boaz is a bit of a pirate. I think he has been keeping one eye covered.

Ruth 2: 11-12

Now this may just sound like Boaz is a righteous man who is impressed with this woman. Or maybe he is single and thinks she is pretty. Or maybe there is more. Maybe Boaz has been keeping one eye covered so he can see in the darkness.

Do you remember the story of the Battle of Jericho? It was the first battle in a series of the Israelites securing the Promised Land. The walls were huge and impenetrable so the Israelites sent in spies. The spies found shelter under the protection of an innkeeper named Rahab. Now, innkeeper here is likely a euphemism for a prostitute. Her house is embedded in the wall, which sounds scenic until you consider the wall was the first line of defense and all of the slings and arrows made it to her window first. So, she was a poor single woman in a pagan city who was likely forced into prostitution because she could do nothing else. Powerless and poor women in this culture often resulted in selling the only asset they had, their bodies.

At any rate, after a series of events, these spies are protected by this poor, powerless, pagan prostitute and they agree to preserve her life when they invade. She keeps her word and they keep theirs. After this foreigners sojourn with the Israelites, she eventually marries one of them named Salmon, and they had a son. Do you know his name? Boaz. This Boaz.

Boaz knows the darkness. He knows what it's like to be an outsider. He knows what it's like to be whispered about. He knows what it's like for a poor powerless woman always one

step away from prostitution. Boaz grew up with a mom who told him stories of being saved. I am guessing he had a soft spot for moments like this.

Boaz had a lot of light in his life. We find out he is a man of some standing and some wealth, a man to be reckoned with and familiar with the light. You know what happens in the light? It becomes normal. You forget some people are still in the dark. You forget that many people's lives are being lived in the shadows. You just focus upon the prosperity of the light and keep the darkness as far away as possible.

But Boaz didn't do that. He didn't become fearful of the dark, nor did he become jaded or cynical of those in the darkness. But rather, I think he learned to keep one eye closed, so when someone was in a dark place, he could see them. He kept one eye covered, so it was always sensitive to people in the shadows.

Our church just had the great honor of sending close to 180 people to Tijuana, Mexico to build ten houses for those in extreme poverty. From seven year olds to 70 year olds, people put in literally blood, sweat and tears, navigating the terrain of blistering heat and extreme rain and mud to do this work. It was easy to do when you see kids walking barefoot through garbage. When you see tattered people subsisting on so little. When you see the already poor lose everything because of a fire, it's easy to do. You are in the darkness. You see it, smell it and taste it. It's easy to see in the dark because you are encamped right there among it.

But something magical happens. You cross the border. You feel cool air conditioning and a roof over your head. You go to a bathroom that isn't a hole in the ground. You don't wake up with aches and pains and dust in your nose. You can flip to the *Bachelor* and *SportsCenter*. And the magical thing that happens? You are surrounded by the light, and you can forget the taste and smell of it all.

In the passage from Deuteronomy 24, he says you are to leave margin for those on the margin because you used to be a slave. Don't ever forget you were on the margin. In saying

this, he is reminding them to keep one eye closed. You are going into the land of milk and honey, but don't forget you used to make bricks under the hot Egyptian sun. Keep one eye closed and remember.

God always wants us to be ready and able to see in the dark. The same is true with Jesus. The consistent reminder from the gospel is that we are sinners saved by grace. We are slaves set free. We were enemies of God and yet Christ died for us. The whole reason we are reminded of this is, 1) It is true, 2) It is a reminder to keep one eye closed.

It is a reminder that you were once in darkness and you need to be ready to see in the dark. Because the longer you have salvation, the more blind you can become to those still wondering and wandering in the darkness. You can become entitled to your faith and only a defender of the light without ever being one who ventures out into the night looking for lost souls.

My simple reminder today is to keep one eye covered. Maybe you do that by serving the homeless. Maybe you do that by prayer walking through a bad neighborhood. Maybe you do that by exposing yourself to books and media outside of the Christian mainstream. Maybe you do that by yearly going to Mexico. The purpose is not to surround yourself with safety, light and perpetual goodness. That's what we get to do in heaven. The purpose in this short time we have is to get a little messy with one eye closed. To always be ready to see in the dark and grab wandering souls.

Here is the best news of all. If you will keep one eye closed this week, you have a much better chance of seeing God and seeing God at work. God does some of his best work in the darkness. He aligns himself with the poor and the powerless. If you train yourself to see in the dark, you will see God in a whole new way.