

## INTRODUCTION

# An Advent Journey

### THE STORY BEHIND THE CHRISTMAS STORY

We're all familiar with the Christmas story, but do you know the story *behind* the story?

Tucked away in the Old Testament, hundreds of years before Mary, Joseph and the birth of Jesus, is the story of a girl called Ruth. And at a time when we're very aware of all that is not right in our world, this story is one that rings true. It's a story of sadness and tears, even of death, but it's a story where hope is found in the darkest of places.

Hope is what we need right now, isn't it? After all, for most of us, these have been the strangest years in living memory. Maybe the very idea of 'celebrating' at Christmas seems like a gear shift, given how things have been recently. But that's what makes Ruth the perfect book for Advent – and *this* Advent especially.

As we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Saviour, the book of Ruth will show us an aching world that we recognise all too well – and yet it will *also* show us that the steadfast kindness of God brings hope for such a world.

## USING THIS DEVOTIONAL

*Finding Hope Under Bethlehem Skies* is made up of twenty-five written reflections, one for every day in December, up to and including Christmas Day.

For each day, you'll be encouraged to read a few verses from Ruth and then the written reflection. At the end, there are little suggestions or questions for further consideration and prayer. You might like to commit to reading the reflections with a friend and then discussing these closing questions together.

Each day's reflection finishes with a song or version of a carol by way of a response. These can easily be found online, but we've compiled a Spotify playlist that includes them all – just search for 'Finding Hope Under Bethlehem Skies' on the Spotify app.

## DISCOVERING HOPE TOGETHER

Scripture is best read together with others. For myself, it's been a joy to journey through the book of Ruth alongside sisters and brothers in Christ. These devotions first emerged as a daily Advent email whilst preaching through Ruth at Grace Church Barrow, back in Advent 2019. A year later, when Grace Church was merging with St Paul's Barrow, and after feedback and encouragement, this material was edited into a physical devotional to raise funds for local ministry. Along the way, I've been greatly helped by the writing, sermons, tweets and ponderings of Paul Miller, Mary Evans, Christopher Ash, John Piper, Jonty Allcock, James Bejon, and, last but certainly not least, my wife, Zoe. In thankfulness of the way she daily 'enfleshes' the steadfast love of the Lord, it is to her that these devotions are dedicated.

One of my favourite Christmas carols – 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' – includes this line:

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

So as we journey together through the book of Ruth this Advent,  
I pray that you might indeed find hope in the darkest of nights.



1 DECEMBER

# Preparing for Christmas?

*Read Ruth 1:1 and 4:16–17*

## **TORN BY CHRISTMAS**

The jingle-filled adverts are on the TV, the kids are practising for their nativity plays and the coffee chains are pushing over-priced, sugar-laced drinks in supposedly festive cups. We're all preparing for Christmas!

But all of that Christmas 'wrapping' has a tendency to divide people. We all have a friend who can't help telling us how 'Christmassy' they're feeling – unless that's you! For most of us, though, the pressure to shed loads of cash, create the perfect Christmas experience and pretend you're feeling 'merry' 24-7 can be more than a little bit overwhelming.

So how are you feeling about preparing for Christmas? For Christians, there can be the added pressure of feeling we're the ones who should be the *most* gleeful. After all, it's about Jesus, right?

Whether it's because this has been an especially tough year, or whether it's that you just feel a sense of 'same old, same old', preparing for Christmas can often feel more of a chore than a delight. Yet my hope is that, over this Advent period, the book of Ruth might be just the kind of preparation for Christmas we all need.

## **THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY**

Think of Ruth as 'the story behind the Christmas story'. Although it is set around a thousand years before Mary and Joseph, we'll discover there are a fair few similarities.

For starters, the events of Ruth also take place in Bethlehem (1:1). There's also the fact that the story focuses in on seemingly ordinary people going about their daily lives, as we also see in 1:1. Perhaps more strikingly, like with Christmas, Ruth reaches its climax in the birth of a precious baby.

But these two stories don't just have similarities. They share a much deeper connection...

*Read Ruth 4:16–17*

Spoiler alert: this is where our story is heading! The baby that arrives at the end of Ruth is actually no less than the grandfather of Israel's great king, David. And, as we'll discover, this makes him a great, great, great, great... ancestor of *Jesus*.

Is this the ending that you'd expect when you first read Ruth 1:1?

## **PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED**

In a way, we can all get very used to Jesus. Of course, there can be something beautiful about things feeling familiar, perhaps like returning to our childhood home or watching a favourite film. But however familiar we are with the Christmas story, and however familiar we might even be with the story of Ruth, I pray that seeing Ruth as 'the story behind the story' might protect us from an overfamiliarity as we prepare for Christmas.

*Take some time to pray that God would be preparing your heart throughout this Advent. Even dare to pray that his astounding kindness would be unexpected to you in these coming days.*



Listen to 'Light of the World' by Lauren Daigle.

2 DECEMBER

# What Do You Really Need This Christmas?

*Read Ruth 1:1 and Judges 21:25*

## **WHAT DO WE REALLY NEED?**

It may just be me, but it seems that the older you get, the more that your Christmas presents tend to focus on what you *need*, rather than what you *want*.

You even see it in the questions we ask. Think about how we might ask a ten-year-old child, ‘So what do you *want* for Christmas, love?’

Now compare that to what I tend to get asked. ‘So is there anything you *need* this year?’

Maybe I’m just bitter about last year’s haul of hankies and shower gel!

## **ISRAEL’S CHRISTMAS LIST**

Yesterday, we had a sneak preview of how the book of Ruth finishes. A baby is born amongst God’s people – and, crucially, we’re told that one of his descendants will be their future king.

Why’s that significant? Notice again the way Ruth begins: ‘In the days when the judges ruled...’ (v. 1). At a basic level, this gives us a rough dating for when the events of Ruth are set – probably 1200–1000 BC. But more significantly, it also hints at *why* we need this story so much.

In our English Bibles, the book of Ruth has been conveniently placed just after the book of Judges. That means we don't have to look far to understand our narrator's opening comment.

Have a look at the final verse of Judges – Judges 21:25, the very words that set the scene for Ruth...

It's a revealing analysis of life amongst God's people at that time. And yes, we're certainly meant to draw the connection between the two halves of the verse! God's people were without a king – and as a result, it was a horrific free-for-all. To put it simply, the gift of a king was what they desperately *needed*.

But remember what we saw yesterday about how Ruth ends. The birth of someone who will be the ancestor of this king is *exactly* what God is going to provide, albeit through circumstances we'd never expect.

Advent has traditionally been seen as an opportunity for God's people to learn to exercise their waiting muscles. But we tend to wait best – and long most – for the things we know we want *and* need.

We're only just beginning our journey through Ruth, but I'm praying its message will help us to hunger and thirst afresh for our King, Jesus. This gift of a King in the midst of all the mess of life is the most spectacular display of God's kindness. A kindness that, God willing, won't leave us unchanged.

*Pray that God would help you rediscover your own need of this King, born in a manger and under Bethlehem skies. Pray that our hearts, naturally bent on doing 'as we see fit', would instead be open to trusting in Jesus' kind and royal rule.*



Listen to 'O Come, All You Unfaithful' by Sovereign Grace Music.

3 DECEMBER

# Escaping Advent?

Read *Ruth* 1:1–2

## THE CUPBOARDS ARE BARE

Christmas is often portrayed as a time of feasting: platefuls of mince pies, chocolate supplies in every room, turkey with all the trimmings...

The beginning of *Ruth* therefore feels like quite a gear change: ‘... there was a famine in the land’ (v. 1). But if we linger here, we’ll see this opening has an important – and even *refreshing* – word for us.

‘Land’ here refers to Israel and Judah, the place of blessing that God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. So why was there a famine?

## WARNING LIGHTS

We need to read between the lines here. We saw yesterday that God’s people were on a downward spiral of disobedience and idolatry (*Ruth* 1:1 and *Judges* 21:25). But the news of a ‘famine’ is further evidence things have gone awry spiritually. The Old Testament law included clear consequences if God’s people turned away to false gods. Significantly, one of these consequences was famine (see *Deuteronomy* 28:15–29).

In other words, this national widespread hunger should have been a warning light flashing on Israel’s dashboard. It meant all was not well with their relationship with God.

And like all warning lights, it was meant to evoke a response...



## MEET THE FAMILY

As we're introduced to the people in this story, it's notable that the very first details given are not their names, characters or occupations. Instead, it's *where they're from* – Bethlehem – and *where they're going* – Moab. To put it another way, we're told their *response* to the famine. And despite first impressions, these locations reveal a particularly unwise response.

Firstly, Bethlehem was part of God's promised land. Its name literally meant 'house of bread'. But Moab, on the other hand, was one of the long-standing enemies of God's people. The first readers of this story would have therefore raised their eyebrows: 'You're going where? To *Moab*?!'

Both places are then repeated for emphasis in verse 2, sandwiching the family's names: 'They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.'

Now, we might think, 'Aren't they just doing what anyone would have done in that situation?' But remember that this was no ordinary famine. It was a God-given warning light urging God's people to turn to him in repentance. It certainly wasn't an invitation to flee further away!

## DENIAL STRATEGIES

But isn't this what we do? Essentially, Elimelek and Naomi's actions are just one little example of how we respond when confronted with the reality of a fractured relationship with God. When faced with our brokenness and depravity, it's all too easy to turn away.

All this might not seem very Christmassy! But traditionally, Advent is understood as an opportunity to face up to the darkness in order to appreciate the light.

Maybe our culture's desire to 'bring Christmas in early' is symptomatic of trying to escape the reality of our brokenness?<sup>1</sup> Yet no one can escape reality for long. In a world that aches with sin, pretending everything is endless cheer is both deceptive *and* exhausting.

*Things aren't as they should be – globally, nationally, but also personally. Take some time to confess your own sin. Do you seek to 'escape' from this reality? Give thanks that God's word is honest about the brokenness of our aching world. How could this inspire conversations you have today?*



Listen to 'Deliver Us' by Andrew Peterson.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this point to Tish Harrison Warren in her article, 'Want to Get into the Christmas Spirit? Face the Darkness' (The New York Times, 30 November 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/opinion/sunday/christmas-season-advent-celebration.html>