

## Ruth 1

Of all the books in the Bible, Ruth is among the easiest for a first-time reader. It is an engaging narrative with just three main characters, an easy to follow plot with conflict and a satisfying resolution. Plus, at only four chapters, it is short enough to read in one sitting.

So why read it? John Piper puts it this way: “[Ruth] is a story for people who wonder where God is when there are no dreams or visions or prophets. It's for people who wonder where God is when one tragedy after another attacks their faith. It's a story for people who wonder whether a life of integrity in tough times is worth it. And it's a story for people who can't imagine that anything great could ever come of their ordinary lives of faith.”

Ruth is a story of “ordinary” men and women in a trying time. The individuals in the narrative face the same challenges that countless individuals in their day did.

So why them? Romans 15:4 tells us that the Scriptures were written “for our instruction” and that “we might have hope.” In its own easy-to-read way, Ruth offers us instruction on how to live as the people of God and points us to hope of a God who offers incredible redemption.

**Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with 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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there.**

Although the book is named Ruth, the first woman who appears on the scene is Naomi, and in many ways, both the first chapter and the entire book is her story. That said, we'll look at chapter one the way the early 18<sup>th</sup> century writer, Matthew Henry, did—as a series of five afflictions that Naomi faces:

- The housewife forced to leave
- The mourning widow
- The mourning mother
- The powerless mother-in-law
- The destitute woman back at home with God's hand against her

The story is set in the time of the judges—the 350-year period between the conquest of the Promised Land and the rise of the monarchy. This time period (recounted in the Book of Judges) was one of religious malaise and political hardship. Therefore, when the book of Ruth places itself in the period of the judges, the reader immediately knows it is something of a dark time. Worse, there is a famine in the land. Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, but instead, Israel has nothing. Deuteronomy 28 (and elsewhere) states that famine is God's judgment on the people's apostasy, so they may be living in a time of God's active judgment.

Worse still, this family is leaving for Moab, descendants of the incestuous relationship of Abraham's nephew Lot (Genesis 19) and Israel's enemy and sometimes conqueror (cf. Judges 3). The Moabites worshipped the god Chemosh and were one of the nations from which Israel had, to its shame, adopted religious practices (Judges 10:6).

Not every individual who fled to Moab, a distance of 40 miles or so from Bethlehem, was in the wrong, but the mere suggestion that a famine has encouraged this family to enter the spiritual rat's nest that is Moab leaves little doubt of the crisis this family faces. Can you picture this family—Mom, Dad and two sons, leaving home and heading out, desperate for something to change but not knowing what the future holds?

**Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.**

As if famine and leaving home wasn't bad enough, it gets much worse. Naomi's husband dies. Perhaps anxious to continue the family line, the boys marry but after a decade of barrenness, they die as well.

Imagine Naomi's anguish. The grief of burying her sons, the ones she had carried in her womb, nursed, taught and raised is thrust upon her along with the reality that as a widow with no male protector, she is the lowest of the low—the equivalent of a homeless woman in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Not to mention that she is surrounded not by loving friends and family but by only two pagan women.

We should also note here that marrying foreign women, as Mahlon and Chilion did, was one of the great dangers and failures of ancient Israel. Many Old Testament passages (Numbers 22-25, Deuteronomy 23:3-7, Ezra 9:2, 12, 10:44, and Nehemiah 13:23-25) talk about the dangers of marrying Moabite women. While Deuteronomy 7:3 allows Israelites to marry Moabites who enter the community of faith, in most cases, marriages with foreigners pull Israelites further into the pagan culture and worship from which they were to separate.

Again, while we cannot know for sure the exact rationale for their decision to marry Moabite women and God's judgment on that specific act (some commentators argue that the death of Mahlon and Chilion is God's judgment on their marrying Moabite women), the entire section goes to show how bad the situation was—for Israel but especially for Naomi. She has experienced famine, moved to another country, had sons marry Moabites, and now watched the death of the three men in her life. This is a destitute, broken woman. Mark Dever points out, she is on the cusp of disappearing from the pages of history—no descendants, no land, nothing to show from her hard time on earth.

But what to make of these two Moabite daughters-in-law?

**Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the Lord had visited His people in giving them food. So she departed from the place where she was and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May the Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband."**

We get our first hint of good news here in hearing that the Lord has "visited" His people in giving them food. God has not forgotten His people forever.

Then, we get our second hint of good news seeing that the two Moabite women both have been, and continue to be, kind to Naomi. For all the danger that foreign women supposedly cause, these are two that have cared for Naomi and are now entertaining the idea of leaving their country to stay with her.

Naomi, however, pushes them back towards home. The hope that she has for them is that they will return home and find a husband. She does not want them to be in her shoes—an old widow with no one to take care of them. If they could get married (and staying in their community is the best way to do to that), they would “find rest.” Rest is something God has promised His people, and Naomi knows Ruth and Orpah need it, too.

**Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, “No, but we will surely return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me.”**

The women’s love for Naomi is indeed great, for they are willing to leave their home to stay with Naomi. Naomi, however, will have none of it, and she becomes more adamant that they should return home.

Deuteronomy 25 instructed that in order to maintain inheritance lines, if a man dies without any children, his brother should marry his widow and have a child. Naomi reminds the girls that while the law holds out this hope for widows, it is an empty hope for them because Mahlon and Chilion will have no younger brothers.

She closes with the statement, “The hand of the Lord has gone forth against me.” In this moment, she is something like a female counterpart to Job, who also loses children and property and is overwhelmed with despair. Both individuals see God as the cause of the affliction (cf. Job 6:4).

But is it true? Is God against Naomi?

While we don’t know whether it was God’s judgment to take the life of Naomi’s husband and sons, we do know that He is omnipresent and sovereign. He could have sustained their lives and didn’t, so in that sense, yes, He has afflicted her. He hasn’t afflicted her joyfully or nonchalantly, but He did allow this pain on her.

But He is also the God who turns evil to good. He is the God who reminds us in James 1:2-4 that trials test our faith and produce endurance. He is the God who, amidst despair, is still the hope. The pain is real, and so is the hope.

**And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where**

**you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if death parts you and me.” When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.**

Orpah capitulates and returns home whereas Ruth stands steadfastly with Naomi. Three times, Naomi encourages her to return back to her people (which some Hebrew rabbis attributed to Naomi’s desire to test Ruth’s commitment), and three times Ruth announces her commitment to stay with Naomi.

Her final statement is an exceptionally impressive example of a commitment “at any cost.” Think of the commitment she is making here—she is leaving her people, her culture, and her religion and for what? For a community that sees her as an outcast and for a lifetime with no husband or children (perhaps you, too, are a woman worried that following God will cost you a marriage or family). She is likely stepping into a life of poverty and says she won’t leave even after Naomi dies. She commits for the future without knowing the future.

John Constable says “there is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel.” Naomi says that God is against her and Ruth says, “That is the God I want.” Simply astounding.

Why does she do this? The text hints at two reasons. The first is out of love for Naomi (cf. 4:15). Ruth shows an incredibly sacrificial love for her mother-in-law. Second, 2:12 will point out that Ruth has taken refuge under God’s wings. She is turning her back on her gods and choosing to align herself under the Lord.

It’s a powerful picture of what the call of the Gospel requires and offers. “Come, and it will cost you everything!” You’ve tasted a bit of the blessing perhaps, but that has only whetted your appetite. Sell everything and tie yourself to Jesus and to his people. Whatever the future holds, you know it is better under His wings and with His people than with everything familiar. Many are like Orpah, who stick with Jesus until the cost seems too great. Their affection has limits.

Will you be like Ruth? Following at any cost? As Ruth will find out, the reward is far greater than you ever imagined.

**So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?” So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.**

After a journey of perhaps a week, the two women arrive in Bethlehem—Ruth for the first time and Naomi for the first time in a decade. Naomi had left to escape death, but death still found and ravaged her family. She comes home despairing with only her “pagan” daughter-in-law.

We are pushed back to Naomi's despair—her self-appointed name "Mara" means "Bitter." The Lord has brought her back empty, she says.

But is she really empty? She has returned home because the Lord has visited His people and brought food again. She just had a loving, kind woman pledge lifelong commitment and care to her. On both the national and the individual level, God is still present. It is hard to see amidst the pain, but He is there.

It is natural to exaggerate our situation and ignore God's specific care for us. As Sinclair Ferguson notes, whether the death that came on this family is a judgment on sin or simply was the hardship of life, the mercy and love of God is present as well. Where there is judgment on sin and where there is pain in life, there is a yet-more-powerful mercy.

The final verse of the chapter is a summary verse of sorts and reminds us that Ruth is a Moabite. If we forget everything else from chapter one, let us remember that Naomi is a broken, bitter woman and Ruth is a Moabite.

In some ways, Ruth is the very symbol of what has gone wrong for Israel and for Naomi. And yet, isn't it like God to use that very thing for our redemption and hope? Doesn't that sound like the cross? The very symbol of what sin had done becomes the instrument of our redemption and hope.

## Suggested Study Outline<sup>1</sup>

- I. Pray
- II. Backdrop—Read explanatory notes
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
  - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
  - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
  - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
  - d. Who is the main character here—Naomi or Ruth?
  - e. How should we evaluate Naomi's character here? Positive, negative, both, neither?
  - f. How should we evaluate Orpah?
  - g. What do you know of the time of the judges? Look at 2:16-18, 21:25, and/or recall stories like Gideon and Samson to remind yourself.
- V. Application Questions
  - a. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
  - b. Where do you need to give God thanks for His care in everyday life?
  - c. Are you at an Orpah/Ruth moment? Is there an area in which you need to commit completely to Christ rather than look for an "out"?
  - d. Do trying situations and heartache push you towards God or away from Him?
  - e. Have you ever seen God use your sin and pain for good?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is...
  - a. God sees and engages in nations as well as the lives of individuals within that nation.
  - b. We have a God who both fills us and empties us, visits us with kindness and allows us hardship and death.
  - c. There are times in life where we need to make firm, complete commitments without knowing the results.
- VIII. Pray

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<sup>1</sup> The questions here are suggestions. Pick the questions you want to use or create your own. The goal is to: 1) Get at the true meaning of the text; 2) Engage the student; 3) Push the student to apply the truth of the text. In addition, use sessions like this to ensure the student believes the Gospel and could study Scripture for himself/herself.