

Ruth 1 – “From Brokenness to Blessing”

We come to a small but powerful book. It's been called one of the great love stories of all time. It's filled with literary art and theological depth. It's a treasure for us and it will be a joy to study through this together over the next few weeks.

“Ruth is the only book in the Old Testament named after an ancestor of Jesus Christ, the only one named after a non-Jew, and one of only two in the entire Bible named after a woman. Ruth's name means “friendship,” and she really showed her quality in that area. Hers is a story of God's providence and redemption overlaying the main story line of human love and relational interaction. Love is at the center of each of Ruth's four chapters.” ¹

“The Old Testament is full of stories about God using great leaders like David and Moses. But God is not concerned only with people of power or status. Ruth and Naomi were women who had neither power nor position: Both were widows, and one was a foreigner. Although their circumstances were dire and they had little hope for the future, God used the events of their lives to pave the way for the Savior of humanity.” ²

A key theme we'll see in the book of Ruth is redemption. The Hebrew word *ga'al* is used 21 times in these 85 verses that make up the book of Ruth. It foreshadows the beautiful redemption we have received through Jesus Christ. Interestingly the book of Ruth is sandwiched between Judges and 1 Samuel. Judges detailing the failures of Israel, and 1 Samuel brings us to the introduction of God's Kingdom. But in between it's the story of a Hebrew man redeeming and receiving a gentile bride. What a prophetic picture we have in this.

- Today Israel has disobeyed, rejected Jesus. They've been put aside for a time. But in the meantime, a Gentile bride has been formed – the Church. We've been redeemed through Jesus Christ and we await the glorious kingdom of God to be established again on earth.
- Interestingly the book of Ruth was read as liturgy during the feast of Pentecost. When was the church inaugurated? On Pentecost.

Summary Statement:

¹ Heitzig, Skip. (2007). *The Bible From 30,000 Feet* (pg. 89). Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishing.

² Custis, M. (2014). *Ruth: Hope for the Marginalized* (p. 3). Lexham Press.

The passage narrates Ruth's courageous decision to follow her mother-in-law Naomi back to Bethlehem after the death of their husbands, showcasing themes of loyalty, faith, and God's providence in times of uncertainty.

1. A Season of Famine – 1:1-5

1:1 - *Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.*

Right away we get the context of this story. This is all going on during the days of the judges. This was a period lasting anywhere from 325-480 years (the period of time which the judges ruled is debated). But it was a dark period in Israel's history. They've come into the Promised land under Joshua's leadership and have had great conquests. But then Joshua died. And everyone wanted a king like everyone else, yet God was to be their king. Israel didn't do a good job of letting God lead them, and it led to disobedience and judgment. A sad sin cycle was repeated over and over in Judges where the people served God, sinned against God, then became slaves to other nations whom God raised up against Israel as judgement. Israel would eventually cry out to God, He would raise up a judge or deliverer to defeat their enemies, and they'd be back to serving God. But it didn't stay that way. The cycle repeated 7x in Judges: Sin, suffering, supplication, salvation.

The book of Judges ends with a good, but sad, summary of the state of Israel: **Judges 21:25**, *"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."*

And it's in this dark backdrop that God pulls this little jewel out to show that though things may look bad, God is at work. There are still righteous people serving God. God is still doing a good thing. He's still providentially leading things to bring about His purposes.

So this time period may have been during the leadership of Gideon. We know the Midianites were making it hard for Israel. This could have been the famine spoken of. It could have been during the days of Samson. We're not sure.

- 13 famines are mentioned throughout God's Word and they are typically seen as judgment from God. This certainly was a time where Israel was by

and large living in disobedience to God and so they're experiencing the fallout of that.

But sadly, this family decides to move away, chase after their dreams, try and better their situation. We don't hear that they're seeking God. In fact, they decide to move to enemy territory in hopes things will get better.

Does that sound like a wise decision to you?

They go to Moab which is modern day Jordan. Moab was a nation against Israel and it had a very unhealthy beginning. The nation of Moab began after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot and his two daughters escaped, but then the daughters think they're the only survivors around. They need to have children to keep the human race alive. And they see their dad as the only option. So they get him drunk and they procreate with him. One daughter had a son she named Moab, the other had a son named Ben-Ammi, the father of the Ammonites.

The Moabites were a problem for Israel. The story of Balaam and the talking donkey revolved around the Moabites when their king Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel (Numbers 22-24). Eventually Balaam advised the king to parade the daughters of Moab in front of the Israelites and seek to join them together knowing it would bring the judgment of God against Israel. It's exactly what happened.

The word was clear about Israel's involvement with Moab:

- **Deuteronomy 23:3**, *"An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord forever,"*

In fact God called Moab His 'washpot' in **Psalms 60:8**. This was not a term to express good, but that it was a filthy, unpleasant place. It was like a mop bucket.

So Moab is not the place you should be taking your family. They're leaving Bethlehem of Judah.

- Bethlehem means 'house of bread'. Judah means 'praise'. This was the Land of Promise that they were in. Though they may have been under God's chastening it was meant to lead them to God in repentance. They were to walk by faith and trust the Lord for provision.
- It's never going to be a good result when you leave the land of promise to go into the mop bucket of the world.

1:2 - *The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there.*

In this day names of people weren't given at birth, they were given later. Usually a name represented something about that person.

- **Elimelech** means 'My God is king'. And yet by his actions it seems he was not living this way. There's no indication that God is leading him. Elimelech is making decisions that he thinks will be profitable for him and his family.
- **Naomi** means 'pleasant'. She appears to us as a faithful person who is going along with her husband and is the recipient of some unfortunate outcomes.
- **Mahlon** means 'sickly'.
- **Chilion** means 'pining' or 'wasting away'.
- If you've ever been unhappy with how your parents named you, count your blessings! Could you imagine growing up with these names?

So they went to Moab in hopes of better opportunities. It doesn't seem they were just popping in to find some temporary relief, it says they **remained there**. They got comfortable there, and compromise set in even more so.

1:3-5 - *Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. ⁴ Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. ⁵ Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.*

The story of Ruth begins with 3 deaths. Elimelech moves away from the land of promise hoping to have things get better and he dies.

Then the two sons marry Moabite women. This certainly wasn't the best thing. Nevertheless, we see how God will work through this for His purposes.

Orpah means fawn or gazelle. And linked to the meaning of her name is the idea of hardened, double minded; stiff necked or stubborn. We will see the double mindedness as this plays out.

Ruth means friendship.

Now we read that Naomi survived her two sons and her husband, but this is not good for Naomi. Any potential livelihood and security have disappeared. Typically

a widow would at least have children to support her in her old age. But now Naomi has no one.

It has not been a good move. Elimelech's legacy has been shattered. He took his family where they didn't need to be and didn't rely on the Lord.

- The lesson is so clear and yet has been so often repeated. We think a change of scenery will change our current condition and circumstances. When often times it's not our circumstances but our own heart that needs to change. Do we lean into the Lord in those times and trust Him or do we scramble to make something happen that we think will be a better outcome? Too many people have made big moves only to see they bring their heart and problems with them.
- Oswald Chambers said, "A man has to learn 'the plague of his own heart' before his own problems can be solved ..." ³

How true that is and how clear this truth rings out in the story of Ruth. So as Naomi contemplates what life is going to look like now, she gets word about things back home.

2.A Step of Faith – 1:6-18

1:6-7 - *Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread. ⁷ Therefore she went out 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.*

In Hebrew the same verb is used for 'repent', and in returning home Naomi was demonstrating a change of mind, a 'repentance'." ⁴

Pleasant Naomi finally comes to her senses and realized she's not where she needs to be. She's hearing about God's blessing but she's not in the place to experience God's blessings. Change needs to happen – a change of course and direction.

- It's often the case with us. We're not experiencing the blessing of God because we're not in the place to receive that blessing. We need to repent,

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Be Committed* (p. 17). Victor Books.

⁴ Baldwin, J. G. (1994). Ruth. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 289). Inter-Varsity Press.

change direction (get **out from the place** of dryness), and get on the path of blessing.

1:8-9 - And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each to her mother’s house. The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.” So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

Naomi wasn’t sure if bringing two Moabite women back to Judah would have been a good move. Perhaps she’s trying to cover up the indiscretions they’ve been committing as a family.

But Naomi calls for the Lord to be good to them. She uses the word *hesed* translated as **deal kindly**. This *hesed* is this loyal love of God. It’s often translated lovingkindness, mercy, compassion. This is the great love of God which typically is given freely and committedly by a stronger party to the weaker. This will be a theme in the book of Ruth, seen not just by God but by Boaz too.

Naomi desires that they stay in Moab because this will be the best chance for them to find husbands and to find rest.

- Don’t you love that? Marriage is meant to be a place of rest. It’s meant to provide security and peace and make home a blessing.
- Too many people avoid marriage today thinking it’s going to be a hassle or a place of unrest. This isn’t God’s way.

So as they say their goodbyes the tears and tissues come out.

But as the daughters in law contemplate all this they aren’t settled on it...

1:10-13 - And they said to her, “Surely we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹ But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, ¹³ would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!”

Orpah and Ruth are ready to go with Naomi (at least one of them truly is). But Naomi wants them to be secure. And if they're waiting for Naomi to have more children that they can marry they may be waiting a long time.

- Now that may sound strange to think of them waiting for Naomi to have more children. That's robbing the cradle just a bit.
- But this is probably referring to the Levirate marriage law where if a husband died and left her no children, the husband's brother would have a child with the widowed woman (Deuteronomy 25:5-6).

Naomi ends revealing the grief that she feels because she sees the Lord has been harsh against her. Little does she know that despite the wrong choices that she has been party to, God is at work and is leading things to her blessing.

- It's the same attitude Jacob had when he felt he was losing Benjamin after losing Joseph. He said, *all these things are against me* (Genesis 42:36). But it wasn't so! God was at work doing something even greater than Jacob could have imagined. And it's the same with Naomi. Though she deserves none of it, God is orchestrating things to bring about such a wonderful end even out of suffering and grief.

1:14-15 - *Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."*

Orpah (which meant double minded) returned. But there's something that has changed in Ruth. Whether it's seeing Naomi's resolve to head back to the place of promise, whether it's seeing her face the deaths of her family in faith, something caused Ruth to want to cling to Naomi.

And here Ruth gives one of the greatest declarations of commitment here. She's living up to her name – friendship.

- **Proverbs 17:17, *"A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity."***

1:16-17 - *But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, If anything but death parts you and me."*

Ruth was not just changing a postal code; she was changing her way of life! And this is the kind of commitment God is calling us to. To abandon what we used to know and walk in newness of life in Him.

- **Luke 9:61–62**, *"And another also said, 'Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.'"* ⁶² *But Jesus said to him, 'No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.'"*

To say **your God** will be **my God** is big. This seems to be the declaration of a person who has converted and put her trust in the God of Israel.

She has forsaken the Moabite god Chemosh and has committed to Naomi's God.

- Naomi's compromised state in Moab didn't win anyone over but when she decided to return (repent) to Israel and to the God of Israel, Ruth took notice.
- Sometimes Christians can think that if they just be a little more like the world, they'll win people for Jesus. They live in a compromised state, but it only brings more grief. But when you decide to stand strong for the Lord in a determined way, people will be won over. Ruth finally saw something different in Naomi by which she clung to her.
- Our lives should be lived in a way where people say, I want to know the God you serve. I want to experience what you are experiencing in your life!

1:18 - When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

You can break down the actions of these three women this way:

Naomi was the grieving widow.

Orpah was the leaving widow.

Ruth was the cleaving widow.

- Each of our difficulties can have one of these responses. We can cry 'woe is me' and 'why God?' when trials hit. We can pack up and leave and say, I didn't sign up for this. Or we can simply cling to Jesus in trust that He will strengthen and sustain us through every trial.

3. A Story of Futility BUT Future Fulfillment – 1:19-22

1:19 - Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

These two women set out on a lengthy and treacherous trek all alone. But God is with them and they were protected and provided for. We will know His care when we walk in His will.

As they come to Bethlehem the city is excited. They're seeing a friend and neighbour return. But when the women see Naomi they're a little shocked. A little gossip begins to make the rounds. Naomi seems to be wearing the battle scars of life in Moab.

1:20-21 - *But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"*

Naomi doesn't want to be known as 'pleasant' anymore but **Mara**, which means bitter. She recalls how she went out full but has returned empty. She knows that the Lord has afflicted her for leaving the place of fullness.

- This will always be the case when we turn away from the Lord. You may leave full but you'll return empty. There's nothing good or satisfying apart from Jesus. In Him is truly fullness of life!

Now keep in mind, this is not Naomi being bitter at God. She recognized she has gone through the chastening of the Lord which is always meant to bring us back to the Lord. This is what has happened. She's simply showing her humility and transparency in relaying what she went through and why she went through it. Some have been humbled but are still not humble. This isn't the case with Naomi.

- And nowhere in this story is she referred to as Mara. She may feel her name has changed, but she is still pleasant before the Lord.

1:22 - *So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*

Here now is the beginning of something new. It's the beginning of barley harvest. Things are about to change. Why? Because God is at work. The stage is being set, and it's all being orchestrated providentially by God.

Points to Ponder:

1. Where do you run when life gets hard?

Elimelech ran from Bethlehem to Moab and lost more than he gained.

Don't run from God's place of promise when things get tough – turn to Him in trust. Hardship is often the very place God will shape your faith.

2. What commitments are you making in crisis?

Orpah turned back, but Ruth clung in covenant loyalty.

Will you choose comfort and convenience, or will you cling to Christ in costly obedience? Faithfulness in trials shows the reality of your faith.

3. Do you believe God can bring fullness out of your emptiness?

Naomi felt bitter and empty, yet God was already writing a harvest story of redemption.

Even when God seems out of the picture, trust that He's working unseen to bring blessing, restoration, and redemption.