

Ruth 1 — When The World Is Falling Apart, God’s Good Plan For His People Isn’t.

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Welcome to the CrossWinds Spirit Lake Campus. If you are a visitor or joining us via live streaming on the Internet, it is great to have you. Today, we start a new series in the Old Testament book of Ruth called, “From Ruin To Restoration.” This study will only take four weeks, but it is extremely important for all of us to hear. *This book shows us how in the worst of times, God uses the most unlikely circumstances and the most unlikely people to do good to his people and make his name famous in this world. No matter what happens in life, as Christians, we do not lose hope.*

If you are in a place where it feels like the future looks hopeless, if you are in a place where you can’t see anything good around the corner, you need to be with us for the next four weeks as we study this book. The book of Ruth shows us how no matter how bad things get, no matter what circumstances we face, there is always hope. God often brings that hope from the most unlikely places and the most unlikely people. I find that extremely comforting. I know you will too.

The book of Ruth has four chapters. This morning, we will study the first chapter. The first five verses set the scene for the rest of the book. The rest of chapter 1 continues to set the scene as we see how God is working on his good plan to do good to his people and make his name famous in ways we would never expect. Let’s dive in.

The background of the book.

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and 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. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Ruth 1:1–5 (ESV)

The story begins by telling us this is not fiction but a piece of history. It took place when the judges ruled in the Old Testament. That is not merely a date-stamp. That is a theological description of the character of the times. If you were with us in our study of the book of Genesis, you remember God began his people with Abraham. God called Abraham from the land of Ur to the Promised Land. There was Abraham, his son, Isaac, and Isaac's son, Jacob, whose name was later changed to Israel. Jacob had 12 sons, one of which was named Joseph. His brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph rose from a slave to be second in command of Egypt. Eventually his brothers came to Egypt during a famine. He and his brothers were eventually reunited. The children of Jacob were 70 when they went down to Egypt. Over the next 400 years they had lots of kids and grew to several hundred thousand or more in number. Then there arose a Pharaoh that didn't remember Joseph. He began oppressing Joseph's descendants. They were forced to make bricks without straw and throw their male babies into the Nile River to drown as he attempted to genocide their nation. It was at that time when God raised up a deliverer named Moses to take them out of Egypt. That bring us to the book of Exodus. When Moses took them through the wilderness

to the Promised Land, they rebelled and would not trust God to give them victory. They were forced to wander in the wilderness until every last one of them died. It was their children that went into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. They conquered the Promised Land. While Joshua and the children of the Exodus generation conquered the Promised Land, the bad news is there remained small pockets of resistance in the land. The Israelites in the next generation were to wipe out the remaining pockets of resistance. In Deuteronomy 20:17-18 Moses warned the grandchildren of the Exodus generation to destroy the remaining Amorites, Canaanites, Perizites and Jebusites or they would teach them their detestable ways and they would worship their gods. That is exactly what happened.

They didn't wipe out the remaining Canaanites. Instead they began following the detestable practices of the Canaanites. The book of Judges, which is the time when the book of Ruth was written, begins with the grandchildren of the Exodus generation. It is the story of the grandchildren of the Exodus, and the generations that followed, continually drifting back into sin and following pagan practices.

The book of Judges has a constant refrain. "In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes." The entire nation lived in chaos without law and order.

The Israelites consistently fell into worshipping the false gods of the Canaanites and Amorites and following their detestable practices such as

sacrificing their children in the fire and sexual immorality as part of temple worship.

Just like Moses warned, when the Israelites began to sin, they began to suffer. God either shut off the rain so they had no crops or he allowed them to be conquered or oppressed by an outside nation. Each time God's people cried out to him, God raised up a judge that rescued the people. The people repented and returned to worshipping the one true God of the universe. Over time they slipped right back into pagan worship and started the cycle of sin followed by suffering, repentance and a judge to deliver them. The cycle happened again and again.

If you follow this repeated cycle in the book of Judges, you see that the nation of Israel gets worse over time during this cycle, not better. In addition to the nation getting worse, the judges get worse. The first judge, Othniel, was a squeaky-clean hero. The fifth judge, Gideon, at times shone like a star. At other times, he didn't trust God. He finished his life by making an ephod, which became an idol people worshipped. Gideon was a mixed bag. The last judge, Samson, was a complete mess. As a Nazarite, he was supposed to avoid contact with the dead, instead he scooped honey out of a lion carcass. He was supposed to avoid contact with the Philistines, instead he tried to marry one. He was supposed to avoid contact with fermented drinks, instead he held a drinking party with his future Philistine in-laws. Samson ended his life by bringing judgment on the Philistines, but unlike the other judges, he never brought freedom for God's people.

By the time we get to the end of the book of Judges, we have seen in graphic detail a nation that had completely lost its way. The Israelites were just as bad as the pagan nations that previously inhabited the Promised Land. When the book of Judges ends, the nation of Israel was in one of its darkest and most chaotic periods. Life in the nation of Israel was like the wild west. People were out for themselves. People were far from God.

The book of Judges consistently says that “in those days Israel had no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” The nation needed a godly king to restore order to the nation and return the people to God.

It is in those dark moments of Israel’s history when the story of Ruth took place. Ruth is the story of how in the worst of times — the time of the judges, from the most unlikely of circumstances — a family that ran from God and the most unlikely of people — a Moabite named Ruth, that God does good for his people and makes his name famous in the world. Ruth would get married and have a son named Obed. Obed would have a son named Jesse, Jesse a son named David — King David, the king who brought order to the nation and returned people to worship of God. David’s later descendant, Jesus, did the same thing but on a much better scale. Jesus was born in the worst of times under the most unlikely circumstances to the most unlikely of people, a 14-year-old virgin, to do good for God’s people by dying for our sin and giving us eternal life and making God’s name even more famous in the world.

How did a pagan Moabite become the great grandmother of King David? That is the story of this book.

Not only does the book take place during the chaotic days of the Judges, but it begins with famine in the land of Bethlehem. This is ironic. Bethlehem in Hebrew means house of bread. The house of bread was known for its great agricultural yields, yet there was famine. Why was there famine? We are not told. Most likely it is because of what Moses said in Deuteronomy. If God's people sinned against him, one of the ways God disciplined them would be famine. The story begins when God was disciplining his people for their sin. Rather than repenting of their sin, turning back to God and asking him to provide food, one man named Elimelech, with his wife, Naomi, and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, decided to move out of town to the country of Moab because they had a better harvest.

At first, that doesn't sound like a bad plan. Today, if things aren't working well in a job, and we hear of another job in a different town, we take it. That appears to be common sense. This was different. If you were with us for our study in the book of Genesis, you will remember that God worked hard to get Abraham to the Promised Land and to keep him in the Promised Land. Every time there was a famine in the Promised Land and Abraham or Isaac left the Promised Land because of it his life fell apart. God called his people to the Promised Land and they were to stay there and trust God to meet their needs, even in times of famine. Running from the Promised Land may have at first appeared like the wise thing to do, but in truth it was a form of rebellion against God instead of trusting God to take care of their needs. Running from the Promised Land in famine was a way of saying "God won't take care of my needs

so I need to take care of them myself.” Elimelech knew leaving town was rebellion against God, but he decided to leave town for the greener pasture of Moab anyway.

In addition, Moab was not a great place to go to raise a family. In Genesis 19, we learned the Moabites originated from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter. When Moses left Egypt, the Moabite king Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel in Numbers 22-24. When the cursing backfired, Balak sent the Moabite women into the Israelite camp with instructions to seduce the Israelite men and lead them away from God. They did a pretty good job of it in Numbers 25. The Moabites began out of incest, and sexual infidelity was acceptable for them. In Judges 3, King Eglon of Moab had just finished oppressing the Israelites. There might have been lots of food in Moab but there was definitely bad blood between Israelites and Moabites. Elimelech had no reason to expect a warm welcome for his family in that pagan land. In addition, the Moabites refused to give bread to the Israelites when they left Egypt. The Moabites were legendary for their inhospitality toward foreigners, especially the Israelites. In Deuteronomy 23:2-3 the law of Moses specified the Moabites were so hated that if you married a Moabite, your children down to the tenth generation were not allowed into the temple to worship. If all that is not bad enough, Genesis 19 associates the Moabites with Sodom and their sexual sin.

When we see Elimelech leaving Israel for the land of Moab, he was taking his wife and two sons to a place that was inhospitable, it was known for sexual sin, and the only options for his sons to marry were Moabite women, which would

condemn his family line for the next 10 generations. Why was he doing this? Rather than joining with his fellow Israelites in national repentance and trusting God for food, he figured the only way to solve his problem was to take matters into his own hands because he couldn't rely on God.

What makes this a little humorous is Elimelech's name. Elimelech in Hebrew means *God is my king*. The truth of the matter is that God was not his king. He was his own king doing what was right in his own eyes, which is why he ended up in so much trouble.

How many times are we just like Elimelech? We claim God is our king but rather than trusting God to provide for our needs, we do what feels best at the moment because we think the only way to meet our needs rather than trusting and obeying God is to meet our needs ourselves by compromising our faith.

If you are single and lonely, life is hard. While the rest of your friends are dating, you are home alone. Do you trust God to bring you the right person in the right time or do you take matters into your own hands, like Elimelech? Do you choose to start dating non-Christians because God hasn't yet brought the right person into your life? Do you trust God with your loneliness or do you think the only way to solve the problem is to take matters into your own hands, just like Elimelech?

As the clock rolled forward, in the land of Moab, Elimelech died. Was that God's hand of judgment on him for leading his family away from the Promised Land? We don't know. The Bible is silent.

The inevitable happens for his sons. Mahlon and Chilion marry. Instead of marrying godly women, they marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Each of them are married 10 years but they have no children. One begins to wonder, Elimelech and Naomi left Israel because there was famine on the ground. When their sons married Moabite women, there was a famine of the womb. Children are a gift from the Lord. God was withholding his good gifts. Plus, 10 years, both of Naomi's sons died.

Then Naomi's situation was hopeless. In the ancient world, there was no such thing as a social security system. A woman was provided for by a man. For Naomi, all the men in her life were dead. There was nobody to provide for her. She lived in Moab, a nation legendary for its inhospitality toward strangers and Israelites in particular.

It is in that hopeless situation with a women that was far from God whose entire family was in ruins that we see God beginning to work his amazing plan for the good of his people and the fame of his name.

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But 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. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah

kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return 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 will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town 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 away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. Ruth 1:6–22 (ESV)

While the main point of this book is how God works his plan of redemption in the most unlikely times with the most unlikely people, there are some other observations we can make from this story.

God’s goodness doesn’t always equal my happiness.

Twice in this paragraph, Naomi said her suffering was from God’s hands. Did you notice that she doesn’t see any of God’s goodness behind her suffering?

She knew God allowed this suffering into her life but she didn’t think God could possibly be up to something good when she suffered. She lost sight of the fact that God is always good to his people, even in their sufferings. In the same way, if you are a Christian today, you need to know God is always good to us, even in our suffering. Paul said it this way:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (ESV)

Think of this in the Old Testament. Remember the suffering of Abraham and Sarah to have a child? They tried all of their lives but Sarah never conceived. The Bible says that it was only after her body was as good as dead that God let

her conceive. When Abraham and Sarah suffered because she couldn't conceive, was God being good? He was. He did good to them by letting her conceive in her old age, and God made his name famous through their suffering. God used their suffering as part of his good plan.

Remember the suffering of God's people in Egypt? God used the suffering of his people as the set up for his good plan to rescue his people from Egypt in the Exodus. When we suffer as Christians, that doesn't mean God has forgotten us. Suffering is part of his good plan to write a story of God's rescue. Many times the greater the suffering, the greater the story of rescue. Some of you here this morning are in a place where your world has fallen apart. Don't fret. God is still good. He will use your suffering for good and to make his name famous through your life. Others of you look back on periods of suffering in your life and you can see how God used suffering for good.

God is always being good to his people, even in our suffering.

Incidentally, this means we shouldn't always expect happiness and comfort in the Christian life. If God did good for his people and made his name famous through the suffering of Jesus our savior, why should we expect to have lives that are different? We should expect hard times that echo some of Jesus' sufferings but know God has it all under control. He will do good through them, just like he is about to do with Naomi in this story. Know that at the end of the day, even if we die in the midst of our suffering, God promises to make his name famous through the suffering of his children.

Be careful of circumstance-based theology, doing what feels right at the moment.

That is the way Elimelech approached life. No crops in Bethlehem meant moving to a place that had crops, even if it meant moving away from God's people and the land of promise. Whatever looked like the easiest way to solve a problem was the way to go. That is circumstance-based theology. Naomi fell into that same trap. Naomi told her daughters-in-law, *there was no way she could provide another son for them to marry*. She was talking about levirate marriage, which means marrying a deceased brother's wife to provide children in his name. She saw no way for Orpah and Ruth to get married in Israel because they were Moabites, so instead of sending them to God with this problem, she sent them away from God and back to Moab all because she doesn't see how circumstances will work out.

Circumstance-based theology is making choices without faith and without trusting in God to provide for your needs if you do what is right. Seek God, trust God and do what is right. He will provide for your needs even though circumstances feel like that will never take place.

Don't become so absorbed in self-pity that you fail to see God's kindness through other people.

In what is probably the most famous verses in the book, after Orpah reluctantly agrees to move back to Moab, Ruth refuses to leave Naomi.

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return 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 will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." Ruth 1:16–17 (ESV)

The wording Ruth used in the Hebrew is similar to the kind of commitment made in a marriage ceremony. Ruth promised to go wherever Naomi went, stay wherever Naomi stayed. Ruth promised to leave the Moabites and become an Israelite. She rejected the gods of Moab to worship the one true God of the universe. Ruth became a Christian. Nothing but death would take Ruth away from Naomi.

Think about this. Ruth was a young woman that committed the rest of her life to not taking care of her loneliness but to caring for her widowed and vulnerable mother-in-law in a foreign country. At least on paper, Ruth was willing to sacrifice the possibility of remarriage to care for Naomi. Ruth is an amazing woman of incredible Godly character. Ruth would literally save Naomi's life by gathering food for both of them. What did Naomi say to Ruth after her impassioned promise to give the rest of her life to care for her mother-in-law? Absolutely nothing! She didn't even say thank you. In Hebrew it simply says that Naomi stopped talking.

When Naomi eventually came into Bethlehem and everyone saw her, all Naomi could say is "on't call me Naomi, which means pleasant, but call me Mara, which means bitter. I went away full but I am coming home empty. I have absolutely nothing."

Who was standing next to Naomi the whole time? Ruth! The woman that just promised to give the rest of her life to taking care of her elderly mother-in-law.

Isn't this just like us in our suffering?. We get so self-absorbed that we completely overlook the people God puts in our lives to help carry us through those difficult times and bless us beyond what we deserve. In fact, just like Naomi, we often ignore them and are ungrateful to them because we are too busy wallowing in self-pity, forgetting that God is always good to his people even in our suffering.

As the book unfolds, in Ruth 4, we will see the people around Naomi tell her having Ruth is better than having seven sons because Ruth was a woman of incredible selflessness and godly character. Naomi's great blessing was right under her nose and she didn't see her, a woman named Ruth.

God can turn bitterness into sweetness in ways we can't imagine.

There is some interesting historical background. Naomi asked to be called Mara, which means bitter. She saw no hope for the future. This was not the first time the word mara was used in the Bible. Probably the most famous occurrence of mara was when the Israelites left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea. Only three days after crossing the Red Sea they grumbled because there was no water to drink. Exodus 15:23 tells us how they came across spring water they couldn't drink because it was too bitter. They called the springs Mara to remind them of its bitterness. Then God showed Moses a tree to throw into the spring, and it instantly made the bitter waters sweet. What does this teach us?

When there seemed to be no hope, in the most unexpected of ways, God can take what is bitter in our lives and make it sweet. The book of Ruth is the story of how God takes the bitterness of Ruth and Naomi's life and in the most unexpected way, makes it sweet as God provided a husband for Ruth, a

grandchild for Naomi, and the king of Israel that will bring order to the land and return the people of the nation to God. It all began in the womb of the unlikely person, a moabite named Ruth. Here is the point. God specializes in taking the bitterness of our lives, when we see no hope for the future, and in the most unexpected way turns it into something sweet.

When God empties our hands, it is often to fill them with something better.

Naomi complained she was filled with bitterness. What if God had not brought bitterness into her life? What if God had kept her comfortable in Moab with her husband? What if her sons had never died? She would have stayed in Moab and this book would not have been written. Ruth wouldn't have come back to Israel with her.

If Naomi remained comfortable, Ruth wouldn't have met Boaz, the man we will meet in a later chapter. She wouldn't have had Obed, who had Jesse, who had David, who brought order to a country on the brink of disaster. None of that would have happened if Naomi stayed comfortable in Moab. God emptied her hands and brought suffering into her life not because he hated her but because he loved her and wanted to give her something better. God used her suffering for good.

Conclusion

Some of us walked in this morning angry at God because we are suffering. We didn't realize that God's goodness doesn't always equal our happiness. Sometimes it hurts when he takes things out of our hands, but it is always to give us something better.

Let me say it again. In the worst of times God is using the most unlikely circumstances and the most unlikely people to do good for his people and make his name famous in this world. That is not just the story of Ruth. It is the story of Jesus our savior. It is the story of our lives as well. God is always doing something good for his people, even in our suffering. When the world is falling apart, remember that God's good plan for his people isn't. Therefore we do not lose hope.



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