Ruth

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Call Me Mara
December 7th, 2025
Ruth 1
Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please keep your Bibles open to Ruth chapter 1. Thank you, Diane, for reading for us. We're going to turn our attention this advent season to the story of an unlikely son that was born in the little town of Bethlehem. Only this time, we're going to visit Bethlehem some 1200 years before Mary and Joseph were told that there was no room for them in the inn.

Admittedly, this won't be the most 'Christmasy' of advent series. But that's okay. Jesus taught us:

> You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and **it is they that bear witness about me** (John 5:39 ESV)

Ultimately, EVERY page of the Bible points forward to and finds fulfilment in Jesus. Because we believe that to be true, we can jump into these Old Testament stories with great gospel anticipation!

'But', you might be wondering, 'why Ruth?' That's a great question! To answer it, look with me again at verse 1 of our passage for this morning:

> **In the days when the judges ruled** there was a famine in the land (Ruth 1:1a ESV)

I've chosen to insert this Ruth series right into the middle of our Judges series because the story of Ruth takes place right in the middle of the time of the judges. I want to take advantage of the fact

that we are perfectly positioned to appreciate this contrast! While Abimelech was murdering his 70 brothers and Jephthah was sacrificing his daughter – in the days when Israel was seemingly locked into a downward spiral – THIS beautiful story was also unfolding!

Ruth sits like a diamond of hope set against a black backdrop of despair.

And, in that sense, this is a VERY Christmasy story. It is a story of peace in a time of chaos; light breaking through darkness; joy overcoming bitterness and hope triumphing over despair! The themes of advent are all over this!

So, while this won't be a traditional Christmas series, I believe that the story of Ruth will help to prepare our hearts to see and savour the Saviour who has come. This morning, we're going to make our way through the three scenes in this opening chapter of the story, and we will simply draw out some applications along the way. In verses 1-5 we find:

Scene 1: The Departure

Look with me again at verses 1-2:

> 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. **2** 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. (Ruth 1:1-2a ESV)

The Hebrew name 'Bethlehem' literally means 'house of bread'. It was a city that was known for its good soil and its abundant harvest. But that's not what we find in these opening verses. No, these are the days of the judges – days of sin and apostasy. In this season of judgement, the 'house of bread' is under a famine.

Elimelech has a choice to make. Will he stay in the promised land that God has given to him? Will He trust that the Lord will eventually show mercy to His wayward people?

Or will he take matters into his own hands and lead his family out of the promised land to provide for himself elsewhere? We read in verse 2:

> They went into the country of Moab and remained there. (Ruth 1:2b ESV)

Elimelech – a man whose name was Hebrew for 'my God is King' – decided that God was not to be trusted. He packed up his family and brought them down to the land of the Moabites. If we would hear that detail as we should, then we need to refresh our memory concerning the Moabites. Bible scholar Ian Duguid gives us a helpful summary here. He explains:

> For Israel, Moab was known for several things, none of them good. The Moabites had originated out of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter (Gen. 19:30-38); their king Balak had hired Balaam to curse Israel when they came out of Egypt (Num. 22-24); their women had been a stumbling block to Israel in the wilderness, seducing them to the worship of false gods (Num. 24); and they had recently oppressed the Israelites in the days of Eglon (Judg. 3).[1]

In fact, Jewish tradition holds that this story took place in or just after the days when King Eglon and the Moabites were oppressing the Jews. Elimelech, then, chose to pursue greener pastures in the land of Israel's enemy! And, lest we put all the blame on Elimelech, when his family had the chance to undo his faithless decision, they fared no better. Look again at verses 3-4:

> But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. **4** These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. **They lived there about ten years** (Ruth 1:3-4 ESV)

When Elimelech died, Naomi could have returned to her homeland and her people. Instead, she and her sons chose to marry Moabite women and to set down their roots in this foreign land. As one commentator notes:

> They felt more at home in the land of compromise than in the land of promise.[2]

[1] Ian M. Duguid, *Esther and Ruth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 132.
[2] Ian M. Duguid, *Esther and Ruth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 134.

Let's press 'pause' for a moment and reflect on what we're seeing. The path that God put before this family became hard, so they abandoned it. The book of Ruth took place some 3,000 years ago, but this opening scene feels so familiar. I wonder how many of us in this room can identify with Elimelech and Naomi's decision?

Maybe your life got turned upside down seemingly out of nowhere and you were left asking the question, 'If God is for me, then how could He have allowed this to happen?' What do you do in moments like that? Are you a person who follows the Lord, even when the road ahead looks hard? Or are you a person who regularly chooses the path of least resistance? Jesus warns us:

> For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. **14** For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13b-14 ESV)

Naomi repeated her husband's poor decision and chose to stay in Moab. But she quickly learned that the easy path led to nothing but destruction. We read in verse 5:

> and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:5 ESV)

This latest tragedy in Naomi's life was essentially a death sentence for her. There was no social welfare system for widows that she could rely on. There were no sons carry on her family line. She was a childless widow living in a foreign land.

Before we rush ahead, let's ask an honest question: Here in scene 1, do you think Naomi is capable of foreseeing *any scenario* in which this story ends positively?

Maybe you're living through 'scene 1' this morning. Maybe, every time you think it can't get any worse, another wave of grief crashes over your head. Maybe, like Naomi, you can't possibly imagine how God could redeem your broken story.

If that's you, though I know that perhaps you won't be able to hold onto this truth right now, I need to tell you anyway: There is *always* hope when we entrust ourselves to the Lord. Naomi's story wasn't over, and neither is yours.

In an ironic twist, Naomie actually hears the first whisper of hope from her *Moabite* neighbours. Look again at verse 6:

> 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. (Ruth 1:6 ESV)

There, as she gleaned in the fields of Moab, she was told that God's judgement had lifted, and that He had visited His people with blessing once again. I love the opening words of this verse: 'Then she arose'. We find out later that she didn't yet believe that things would get better. She declares in verse 13 that God is against her! And yet – destitute and desperate – the prodigal daughter arose and returned home. God promises:

> Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 3:7b ESV)

In her grief, she arose, and she took the first step of faith back to the Promised Land. And, in verses 6-18, we meet:

Scene 2: The Faithful Companion

When Naomi set out, she told her two Moabite daughters-in-law to stay behind. She had no sons for them to marry. She had no security that she could offer them. As we've already observed, Israel had a sour history with Moab, so – not only would these women be widows – they would be social outcasts! There was NO hope of a future for them in Bethlehem. When Naomi had finished making her case, we read in verse 14:

> Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. (Ruth 1:14 ESV)

Orpah, for good reason, turned back to find a life in Moab. But Ruth would not dissuaded. She refused to let go of her mother-in-law.

Can we stop and ask a question for a moment? Why did Ruth cling to Naomi?

Was she seeking to find a better life? Bethlehem had formerly been under a famine!

Was she seeking to upgrade her status? As a Moabite in Israel, she would be widely ostracized.

Had she become devoted to Israel's God? Perhaps, but the text doesn't suggest it. Look at verse 15:

> And she said, "See, **your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods**; return after your sister-in-law." (Ruth 1:15 ESV)

Naomi, by all accounts, didn't seem to be particularly interested in converting her daughters to the worship of Yahweh. 'Go home to your gods, girls! There's no future for you in Israel!'

So, why did Ruth cling to Naomi? While it is never stated explicitly, I think the author makes it quite clear: Love. Ruth had come to love her mother-in-law. And she wasn't about to abandon her to die alone. The road ahead would be hard – it may even cost the young woman everything – but she would be faithful to the bitter end. In a moving speech, Ruth declares in verses 16-17:

> "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. **17** 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)

After months of hearing about the heroics of the judges – stories of hidden daggers and flaming foxes – can we stop for a moment to reflect on this seemingly ordinary act of heroism? Ruth says, 'I don't care that there is no future for me in Israel. I don't care that I will die alone in poverty. I don't care that I will need to leave the gods of my ancestors behind me. I don't even care that I will be buried in a foreign land amongst strangers. I am not leaving you.'

That's a heroism that we don't celebrate as often as we should. Self-sacrificing love.

As an aside, I am struck by the fact that this same love is on display in the families in this room who chose to open up your doors to adopt children with special needs. You had every opportunity to look the other way, but you chose instead to say, 'Where you go I will go, and where you lodge

I will lodge.' You committed yourself to a lifetime of unknowns in the name of love. I'm so thankful for the example that you've set, and the light that shines through you.

Of course, the truest display of this self-sacrificing love is found in Jesus who exchanged his throne for a manger, and his crown for a cross. He saw us in our sin and brokenness – desperate and destitute like Naomi – and effectively said, 'Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people.' As the Apostle John describes it:

> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14 ESV)

As you picture Ruth faithfully loving and supporting her mother-in-law – refusing to let her go – I hope that you catch a glimpse of the Saviour who refuses to let YOU go! As you arise and return to the Lord, let this story remind you that you never walk alone. Jesus is a faithful friend, and he will not leave you or forsake you.

Perhaps you argue with Jesus in your mind, and you ask, 'Why would you stay with me? I'm under a curse! I have nothing to offer you!' Perhaps, this morning, you need to learn from Naomi's example. Confronted by the faithful, unrelenting love of her companion, we read in verse 17:

> And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, **she said no more**. (Ruth 1:17 ESV)

That brings us to the final scene in this chapter. In verses 19-22, we find:

Scene 3: The Return

Unfortunately, even in the company of her faithful daughter-in-law, Naomi is too broken to see anything of God's good provision in her life. With Ruth standing next to her, Naomi declares to the women of the city who have come out to meet her:

> I went away full, and **the Lord has brought me back empty**. (Ruth 1:21a ESV)

Naomi is so plagued with grief, that she doesn't recognize the blessing standing beside her.

Sometimes, pain BLINDS us. Doesn't it? Sometimes our grief is so big – so all-consuming – that we struggle to see the good. In this moment, Naomi was – objectively speaking – NOT empty. She had Ruth! She had a person who loved her and who was committed to her no matter what the cost! But, in this moment, Naomi really BELIEVED that she was empty. Her husband was gone. Her sons were gone. And that was all she could see. Chapter 1 ends with Naomi once again accusing God of ruining her life. Look again at verses 20-21:

> She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. **21** 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?" (Ruth 1:20-21 ESV)

Even though this book is called 'Ruth', it is really the story of Naomi. And in this first chapter we see in Naomi at the small scale what we have been seeing in Israel on the larger scale as we have worked through the book of Judges. She has been faithless. She has come under God's judgement. She is so angry that she declares that she wants to be known by a new name! Naomi is the Hebrew word for 'pleasant'. 'Instead', she says, 'call me MARA, for I am BITTER.'

Like a song that ends on a minor chord, there is no resolve at the end of this chapter.

And I think that's a powerful place for us to sit this morning. The Apostle Paul told us:

> For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures **we might have hope**. (Romans 15:4 ESV)

According to the Apostle Paul, there is HOPE to be found in these Old Testament stories. And, as I have prayed and reflected on this opening chapter – this seeming tragedy – there is one hopeful encouragement that has stood out to me.

Naomi didn't know what God was doing. And – in our times of suffering – neither do we. All she could see was that God had brought her home empty. She longed for *blessing*! She longed to be

filled! But what Naomi didn't yet see, and what we need to receive as a word of encouragement, is that:

Sometimes God must empty our hands in order to fill them with something better.[3]

In this opening chapter, Naomi is seemingly stripped of EVERYTHING.

But, it was only when she was stripped of everything that she arose and returned home. There, God lifted Naomi's empty hands, and he filled them with something greater than she could have ever imagined. These same women who wept with Naomi at the town gate upon her arrival will be the ones who rejoice with her in chapter 4. Look at how this story ends!

> And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (Ruth 4:17 ESV)

Naomi had no idea that God was writing her into the royal line of David! She had no idea that her season of suffering was positioning her to receive an honour that was beyond her wildest dreams! She couldn't see it yet. All that she could see was loss.

Maybe you're in the same place this morning. Don't lose hope! The story isn't over! In fact, the pain that you are experiencing today just might be the tool that God is using to prepare you for GREAT things tomorrow! Charles Spurgeon provides us with a great illustration here. Perhaps someone in the room needs to hear it:

> A child had a little garden in which she planted many flowers, but they never grew. She put them in tenderly and carefully, but they would not live. Then she sowed seeds; they sprang up, but very soon they withered away. So she ran to get her father's gardener, and when he came to look at it, he said, "I will make a nice garden for you, so that you may grow whatever you want." He brought a pick, and when the little child saw the terrible pick, she was afraid for her little garden. The gardener struck his tool into the ground and began to make the earth move and shake, for his pickax had caught the edge of a huge stone that underlay almost all of the little plot of ground. All the little flowers were dug up, and the garden was ruined for a while, so that the little girl cried quite a lot. He told her he would make it a beautiful garden yet, and so he did, for having removed the stone that had

[3] This sentence is inspired by a quote by Ian M. Duguid: "Like Naomi, we may be so busy complaining about our emptiness that we miss the fact that God has emptied our hands only in order to fill them with something so much better." Ian M. Duguid, *Esther and Ruth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 149.

> prevented all the plants from taking root, he soon filled the ground with flowers that lived and flourished... Do not weep as the child did, but be comforted by the blessed results, and thank your Father's tender hand.[4]

Naomi thought that she had lost everything. But God had emptied her hands so that He could fill them with something better.

Because that's what He does.

Is it possible that He is doing that in your life this morning? Is He emptying your hands? Perhaps what He is leading you to do this morning is to finally loosen your grip on that which is temporary so that you can receive that which is eternal. Jesus said:

> If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. **25** For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24b-25 ESV)

Let's pray together.

[4] Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon On Prayer & Spiritual Warfare* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1998), 345.