

Ruth 1 is a riveting story. In the Book of Ruth we see friendships formed and old ties left behind. You see the humanity of the characters, such as the presence of grief and tears. The characters in this story must make difficult decisions. You might be forced to ask the deeper questions of life along with the characters. In this story we find different cultural backgrounds come together and we see the first stages of a future romance develop. We see the Lord lovingly guide His people into situations where they must make hard decisions in order to live for Him and serve Him.

This story is history. This story is part of the family-tree of Jesus Christ. The author of this story places a number of the characters in the ancestry of King David. Ruth is referenced in Matthew 1:5 as being a great-great-great grandmother of Jesus Christ. The Book of Ruth is not just a romance, but a story of God revealing His saving and delivering power to the ends of the world. All the complexities of relationships in this story are guided by God's mighty hand at work in the grand history of salvation.

In the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the author wrote this Book so that we can look up and see the sovereign hand of a loving God working for the salvation of His people. Here in Ruth 1, we see that our God who is great in mercy guides a foreigner to find her family among His people.

1. A sad beginning (vs. 1-5)
2. A difficult journey (vs. 6-18)
3. A blessed return (vs. 19-22)

1. A sad beginning (vs. 1-5)

So what is happening in this story? Why has it been included in Scripture in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? We should begin by considering the background and setting for this story.

This history begins in the little town of Bethlehem. The name means 'house of bread'. The author places the story of Ruth at the time of the judges. We don't know exactly when this happens in the Book of Judges. We know this as a time of confusion, when there is poor leadership in the land. But the author also carefully places this historically in the context of the birth of King David, the king in Israel. Remember also that Jesus is born in Bethlehem.

These are hard times. As I just mentioned, the leaders in the land are poor leaders. There is great ambition and little godliness. In this context, you probably won't be surprised to hear that there is famine in the land. Now, famine is an important theme in the life of Israel. For example, Abram and Sarai go to Egypt during a famine (Gen. 12), Isaac goes down to Philistia during a famine (Gen. 26), Jacob and his sons go down to Egypt during a famine (Gen. 43). In each of situation, they are blessed in exile. In our passage, we see a very different situation develop.

Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons immigrate to Moab. Moab and Israel had a history of tensions. First, the people of Moab were the descendants of a wicked, incestuous union between Lot and his daughter (Gen. 19). Second, the Moabites did not meet Israel with bread when they came out of Egypt, and the Moabite king Balaam sent Moabite women into the camp of Israel to seduce the men of Israel. This is when Phinehas in his zeal for the Lord kills a son of a chieftan who was committing adultery with a Moabite woman (Num. 25). Because of this, Moabites and Ammonites were forbidden to enter the assembly of the Lord until the 10th generation after this event (Deut. 23:3-6).

We hear a terrible thing in the next verses. Their father and husband, Elimelech dies. We can feel the grief of this family. Not only are they immigrants to Moab, away from family and friends, but now they have to suffer grief all alone in a foreign land. Sadly, following the death of Elimelech, his sons go astray and marry Moabite women. This cross-cultural marriage was not forbidden. It was primarily cross-cultural marriages with the Canaanites that were forbidden (Deut. 7:1-4). It is also likely that it has been 10 generations since God's word in Deuteronomy. And yet, marriages were forbidden with any woman who was not a believer in Yahweh, as they are now. Mahlon and Chilion live there for about 10 years. And then another tragedy hits the family. Both of these young men die childless.

This was particularly devastating for Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah. Not only did their husbands die, but they were left with no male protection. This was very important in that world as their legal rights were tied up with having a husband. But remember that Naomi is a mother in Israel, and for her, children are very closely connected with hope for the future. This includes the promise of a coming Messiah who would be born of a woman and crush the head of the Serpent. The promise of children also played a major role in the covenant with Abraham. The death of the men and the lack of children meant that her line was as good as dead. Naomi went out with her husband and sons, and they died in exile.

Naomi feels the hand of the Lord heavy upon her. She feels the burning pain of losing her husband and sons whom she loved and who protected her. This must have lead her into a deep sorrow and time of spiritual depression. We see hard providences of the Lord in the life Naomi and Orpah and Ruth. The writer to the Hebrews teaches us that this is the discipline of the Lord (Heb. 12) and that He loves the one He disciplines. The Lord in His sovereignty, is guiding His daughter Naomi to return to Him out of Moab and to place her trust Him. And so we turn to our second point:

2. An difficult journey (vs. 6-18)

In vs. 6, a glimmer of hope shines through the veil of tears, the clouds of sorrow, the clouds which every child of God must struggle with. She hears a rumour, "that the Lord had visited his people and given them food." So she rises to return with her two daughters-in-law. The fact that she rises is an action of faith. The fact that they rise with her shows their love and loyalty to their mother-in-law.

Of course, Ruth and Orpah still have their blood families in Moab. At some point during the return to the Promised Land, Mother Naomi turns to the two young ladies and invites them to return to their homes. It is quite possible that she realizes that there is nothing for these two young ladies in coming back with her. It is more likely that her faltering faith is marked here by a deep cynicism. She tells them to go back to their blood mothers, and to find husbands there. Both Orpah and Ruth start to weep loudly, because they don't not want to leave her.

Naomi seeks to reason with them. She is too old too be married. Cynically, she tells them that she has no sons in her womb. Even if she were to marry, Orpah and Ruth would not wait for these sons to grow old enough to marry. This is a powerful argument for them to return to their homeland. The prospect of being unmarried is intimidating, as is the prospect of not having marital love or male protection. And so, even though Orpah is filled with sorrow and has tears in her eyes, she starts walking back to Moab. In a worldly sense of the word, this makes the most sense.

While Orpah departs with weeping, Ruth clings to her mother-in-law with tears in her eyes. In a very simple way, she clings to her mother-in-law, with her tears falling on Naomi's dress and feet. It is a sad but stunningly beautiful scene. God is working the most glorious miracle of faith and belief in Ruth's

heart. She proceeds to make a very simple statement of faith. She wants to be with Naomi as with a mother. She wants to be adopted into her family, so that Naomi's people become her people. Even more important, she desires that Naomi's God would be her God. But then we are led to the climax of her speech. Her words are reminiscent of a wedding vow, *till death do us part*: "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." Not only is she willing to potentially give up on the prospect of finding a husband, but she commits to being with her new mother until death itself parts them. Think of your wedding vows, when you said '*till death do us part*', you committed to love one another in health and sickness, in riches and poverty. Ruth is a fighter, and Naomi realizes she won't win.

Isn't it incredible what response God's love and guidance brings about? On one hand, Orpah departs with tears, away from the community of God's people. On the other hand, in spite of the cost, Ruth clings to her new mother with tears. There is nothing fancy about this faith, it is a simple faith. But it is a faith that is willing to suffer the prospect of living life unmarried and without children in a foreign land. It is a faith that is willing to count everything as loss for the sake of knowing Christ, and is driven on by the Holy Spirit. May we experience this fearless and simple faith here this morning as well!

Just as Ruth wants to die with Naomi and becomes part of the people of God, so these promises come to fuller realization in the New Testament. Have you ever heard an unbeliever say something like this? Your people are my people. Your God is my God. Till death do us part. I have. We also see this in 2000 years of church history. Men and women have made this commitment to suffer with Jesus and His Church and have faced various degrees of suffering for this decision. Martyrdom is an extreme example of faith. But it does express a very high level of commitment to Christ. If you read *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, you will read of countless men and women who were willing to be thrown to beasts and beheaded and burned for the Name of Jesus Christ, and to be identified with His Church. In 162 AD, a young man named Germanicus, behaved with such astonishing courage in the face of being fed to wild beasts, that many became Christians as they were astonished by his courage. When you see the courage of Ruth, are you astonished by the work that God can do in His people? On the other hand, the prosperity gospel teaches that if you become a Christian you will have health and wealth. But when many face slander, mockery, and other forms of opposition, they become disillusioned. Like Orpah, you might leave with tears, but you leave nevertheless. Those who are baptized and grow up in and are leaders of the church face the same temptations as new believers. We fear the hard decisions that come with following Jesus, and are drawn by the allure of wicked pleasures and the praise of sinful men.

Ruth was not fixated on the cost even though she was willing to go through it. What drove her on was a vision of the glory of the God of the Bible, and nothing would hinder her from pursuing Him in spite of hard decisions. She finds her mother in Israel. Naomi is despairing, discouraged, and even cynical but Ruth has found a new family in the Old Testament Church. Which brings us to their return.

3. A blessed return (vs. 19-22)

We have considered the contrasting responses of Orpah and Ruth. Now let's look at Naomi's response. The poet TS Eliot writes: "What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from." There is a change in the story here. It is a beginning, but an end to an old life. Naomi must find a new life in the ashes of her old life. How is this possible?

Naomi and Ruth arrive back in Bethlehem, the house of bread, and the whole town is stirred as a result of their return. They watch the wife of Elimelech wander in with an unknown young Moabite lady. Naomi's name means delight and she chooses rather to be called Mara, meaning bitterness because the

Lord has dealt bitterly with her. She speaks of going away full and coming back empty. Even though she left in a time of famine and came back in a time of plenty, she is thinking of the way she left with a family and came back with one daughter-in-law. In fact, she is in such a deep sorrow, that she doesn't look up to see Ruth's faithfulness, and the ripe heads of grain in the fields around Bethlehem. She believes that the Lord has testified against her and brought calamity upon her.

Is the Lord judging mother Naomi? If you look at the story of Job, he suffered this loss and worse, and he is described as a perfect man. The fact that Naomi suffered these losses is not proof in itself that she was being judged by the Lord. And yet, we have no indication that Elimelech made the right decision for his family by leading them to the fields of Moab. We have no indication that the men in Naomi's family were righteous men. We do know that there was a lack of good men at this time in Israel. Also, it seems that Mahlon and Chilion compromised by marrying unbelieving women. But we should focus on what the her Father in heaven is doing through discipline to guide her back to Himself.

Many of you will likely empathize with the trouble in Naomi's soul. You might be thinking of a sin that you must repent of. You might be blaming yourself for the sins of someone else. You might be struggling with the tears of living in a broken world where the complexity of situations leave you feeling lonely. The Lord hears you when you are afflicted in your soul, when you experience spiritual depression, and you are confused about everything going on. I think of the words of Psalm 42:7 "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me." Of course, this is preceded by vs. 5: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

In the wreckage that surrounds Naomi. In the middle of her depression and sorrow. In the loss of an heir and the seemingly hopeless future, we see a glimmer of hope. Sometimes we are so fixated on the consequences of sin, the confusion of unanswered difficulties, the embarrassment of repentance, the losses, the cost of discipleship, that it is tough to look up and see God's blessings all around and His hand at work. Naomi can look up and see her daughter in law standing with her and fields of harvest all around her: "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 1:22) It is not yet clear what God is doing in the life of Naomi. God never reveals the whole story to us at one moment in time, but we can trust and hope in His hand that works for our salvation. This passage ends with a return to the people of God, and tones of abundance.

Let's Summarize

We haven't talked much about the romance in the Book of Ruth yet. That is because the story of Ruth is above all a history of salvation. God is working in His mighty power through the trials and suffering of His servants, to accomplish the salvation of His children. Observe the tragedy, look at the mess. But don't linger there. We saw in point two that while both Ruth and Orpah wept, they had drastically different responses to the gospel. Ruth shed tears that showed change. Orpah shed tears that lead her back into her old ways. Naomi may have changed her name to bitterness. But God didn't. Naomi means delight, is this is what God continues to call her. The nation of Moab had a stigma in Israel, since it was scarred by a history of incest and prostitution and conflict with the nation of Israel. But God claims a daughter of this nation, Ruth, as His own. By the power and guidance of the living God, she takes hold of the promises, and binds herself to the people of God. My prayer is that you will place your faith and hope in Him, and that you will follow His Son Jesus Christ and identify with His Church. Amen!