

Ruth 1

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and 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 one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your 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 security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. 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? Do I still have 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. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.' Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So 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 press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them,

'Call me no longer Naomi,  
call me Mara,

for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.  
I went away full,  
but the Lord has brought me back empty;  
why call me Naomi  
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me,  
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?’

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Matthew 5:3-9

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.’

The Biblical book of Ruth may be somewhat unfamiliar to some of you. It is much more frequently preached and taught in Women’s gatherings than it is in worship with the whole church. But there’s wisdom here for all of us, and over the next four weeks we will hear all four chapters.

Before I start, I should let you know – when I was in Seminary, I translated this entire book from the Hebrew, so in these next four weeks you might hear a few things about Ruth that you had not heard before.<sup>1</sup> I would tell you where to expect them, but that would be, “Spoilers!”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you Dr. Schlimm!

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Who reference entirely intentional.

“During the time when the judges ruled Israel,” after the Exodus and before King David. The Promised Land was conquered just a generation ago.<sup>3</sup>

So you have some idea where to place this in history, it’s the Iron Age, somewhere from the 1200’s to 1025 BC. The Assyrian Empire is THE power in the Middle East. The glories of Greek Civilization and the Roman Empire are still seven hundred, a thousand years in the future.

This is an agrarian world. Almost everyone is a farmer. That is how you get food: you grow it. Farming is not so efficient yet, that it can support a lot of specialists or people whose labor does not go directly into growing food.

The unit of this world is a household, a family farm. A man and his wife and children and their servants and any extended family who live with them. The man and his servants work the land, and hopefully bring in enough food to feed the family. If they do, then life is good. If they don’t, that’s calamity. There is no grocery store to go to, and, even if there were, most people don’t have money. Every Winter is an endurance contest between the world and the family – do they have enough food stored up to feed the family until the first harvest of the Spring?

“During the time when the judges ruled Israel,” there was a famine in the land. A Hebrew man from Bethlehem named Elimelek. (Now, in the Hebrew Scriptures, names matter. Not in the sense of fairy tales, know a fairy’s name and you have power over them, but in the sense of identity. Your name says who you are. Adam means “dirt.” Eve means “life.” Elimelek means “My God is King.” His wife, Naomi’s, name means “Pleasantness.” We don’t get the names that they must have called their two sons, because the manuscript calls them Maklon and Kilyon, sickness and death.).

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:5 says that Boaz is the son of Rahab, a prominent figure in the conquest of the Promised Land (Joshua 2-6).

There is a famine in the Land of Canaan, so a Hebrew man named Elimelek and his family travel around the Dead Sea to the land of Moab, present-day Jordan, the neighbors and rivals of the Hebrews. Elimelek dies there. The two sons marry local girls, Orpah and Ruth, or “trickle” and “saturate,” respectively. After ten years, both sons die without children, leaving Naomi with her two daughters-in-law and no men in the family.

They are destitute. They have lost any property they had acquired, because there was no man to hold it. As women, they cannot hold a job. There are no jobs to hold. The only profession open to them is the one that’s been called the oldest profession, and nobody has enough money for even that to be steady work.<sup>4</sup> They have nothing and no way to get food.

They are bereft. They have nothing. The man whose name was “My God is King” is dead. His sons are dead. All three women are grieving for their husbands. They have nothing and no way to get anything. The head of their household is a foreign woman. They have no one to protect them from even casual abuse at the hands of anyone who feels like it.

They are not at the bottom of the food chain. They are not on the food chain. They can reasonably expect to slowly starve to death, not necessarily because anybody bears them any particular ill will, but simply because nobody cares enough and has enough extra to feed them on a long-term basis. They have seen that happen to other women. They have no reasonable hope of anything ever getting better. This is what it is to be bereft.

But then they hear that the Lord takes care of his people and gives them food in Bethlehem, a name which literally means “The House of Bread.” See what I mean about names?

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<sup>4</sup> This description of prostitution goes back to Kipling.

(This is the same Bethlehem where Jesus is born, a thousand-plus years later, to be the one we call the Bread of the World, but that's another sermon.)

So Naomi starts to walk home. She's looking at maybe a four-day walk to get back to Bethlehem.<sup>5</sup> Her daughters-in-law start following her.

Naomi loves her daughters-in-law, and she wants what's best for them. She knows that she, at least, is a Hebrew by birth, and she just might be able to find some distant relative or get someone else to take her in. Her Moabite daughters-in-law, well, they would be foreign refugees in the land of another tribe, just like she had been in Moab. In addition to believing that they'd be better off in Moab, I can understand that she doesn't want to be responsible for them when she has nothing to give them.

She tells them to go back home to their mothers' houses and gives them a blessing.

They argue with her, and then Orpah goes back. She goes back to her mother's house and starts over.

Ruth, though, Ruth doesn't go so easily. Ruth makes a beautiful statement of commitment that I have heard quoted at weddings, even though this is not a romantic relationship. Ruth says,

“Do not urge me to abandon you or to turn away from you!

For where you will go, I will go.

And where you will 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.

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<sup>5</sup> Google Maps calls it 122 miles, or a 41-hour walk, from the city Dhiban, the capital of the ancient nation of Moab in present-day Jordan, to Bethlehem. During that walk, the walkers will climb over 3,700 feet, from 954 feet below sea level to 2,801 feet above sea level.

May the Lord do that to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”<sup>6</sup>

I can picture Naomi shaking her head at this.

What can you say to that?

So the two woman keep walking until they get to Bethlehem.

When they get there, the whole town is stirred up. It’s been ten years since Elimelek and Naomi left, and here she is, coming back without him or their sons, and with this foreign woman tagging along.

A woman asks, “Naomi?”

She responds, “Don’t call me Naomi, Pleasantness, any more. Call me Mara, Bitter, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I left here full, and came back empty. Why call me ‘Pleasantness’ when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and brought calamity upon me?”

Naomi displays some self-knowledge here. She is, indeed, bitter. But she’s better off than she was in Moab.

You see, she and Ruth get to Bethlehem in March, right at the beginning of the barley harvest.

At the harvest, the town of Bethlehem, like every other farming village in the world, needs all hands on deck. Every set of hands that can possibly get into the fields harvesting the grain before it rains and potentially spoils the crop.

At the same time, this is the first harvest this year. That endurance contest I mentioned is over, and they won. After spending all Winter and Spring rationing their food, being slightly

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth 1:16-17 (my translation).

hungry all the time to make sure they made it through, the people of Bethlehem have more food on hand than they can eat right now. There is no time in the year when they would be more favorably disposed to two extra women without husbands coming to town.

There is more to this story, a lot more, and we will discuss it over the next few weeks, but what does the first chapter tell us, three thousand years later?

Firstly, we should be glad for our affluence and for advances in society.

We don't ration our food all Winter to make sure we have enough to last us until the first harvest. Though there are places in the world that still do that.

We do not just let women without husbands starve. Though there are places in the world that still do that.

There are laws that govern the treatment of refugees. Both US laws and International law.

And Secondly, when we feel bereft, when it seems that the Lord has dealt harshly with us and brought calamity upon us, remember Jesus' words. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." "And I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."

And, when those around us feel bereft, remember Jesus' words.

Stand with them.

Comfort them.

For that is how we can truly be the Children of God whom we were born to be.

AMEN