

Series Ruth

This Message #1 Introduction to the Story of Ruth

Scripture Ruth 1:1-22

The book of Ruth has been described as a masterpiece of the storyteller's art. It has been called the most beautiful short story ever written. The story is about people, their problems, and their personal concerns, but more than anything else, the story illustrates the sovereignty of God. God was behind every action even though the people in the story were not aware of it. The Book of Ruth teaches that God works through circumstances and individuals to achieve His purposes.

The story is printed in our Bibles in four chapters. However, the story itself can be divided into six segments, preceded with a short introduction and concluded with an epilogue. I mention this only because these segments give us the outline we will follow in this series of messages. Today we will read all of chapter one, but I will talk mostly about the first five verses. Notice as we read that the first five verses give us important background information.

Read Ruth 1:1-22

The first phrase establishes the time and circumstances of the story. The time of the Judges was a period in Israel's history when there was no central government, and no national leader to inspire and guide the Israelites as Moses and Joshua had done in prior years. The LORD God wanted to be the King over Israel. He had previously given the Israelites through Moses the Law, but the people refused to obey it. Let me read a passage from the Book of Judges, chapter 2 which explains what happened during the first 300 years of the history of Israel:

“The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. ... After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD ... They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel, the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them. ... They were in great distress. Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. ... Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived, for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers. ... They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways” (*Judges 2:7-19*).

As you can recognize from those verses, the time of the judges was a period of spiritual rebellion and chaos in Israel. This situation continued for about 300 years. The phrase in the Book of Judges which summarizes the conditions is “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (*Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, and 21:25*). As a result, no one did what was right in the eyes of the LORD God.

Throughout the era of the Judges, the Israelites went through several spiritual “cycles.” Each cycle began with a forsaking of God and apostasy, which led to a period of desperate conditions. The Israelites would then repent of their evil ways and call to God for help. God would compassionately respond by raising up a judge or deliverer who would lead the Israelites to victory over their enemies and oppressors. The people would then experience a time of peace and prosperity before the next cycle would begin.

Notice in verse one of our story that there was a famine in the land. This famine was not a quirk of “Mother Nature.” Rather it was the LORD working through nature to bring about another cycle of judgment.

These cycles of difficulties should have been no surprise to the Israelites because God had warned them repeatedly about what would happen. For example, in Deuteronomy chapter 11, God had said, “And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your livestock, that you may eat and be filled.”

Then the LORD gave a warning: “Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest the Lord's anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving you” (*Deuteronomy 11:13-17; also see Leviticus 26:3-5, 14-20*).

The LORD brought famine upon the land so that the Israelites would return to Him. However, instead of repenting, calling out to God for relief, and trusting God to sustain him through the famine, the man in verse 1 chose to take his wife and two sons away from their home in Bethlehem to the country of Moab, which was one of the traditional enemies of Israel.

In the Hebrew language, the name “Bethlehem” means “house of bread.” The region around Bethlehem was one of the most fertile areas in all of Israel. Normally, the region around Bethlehem was prosperous and productive, but at this time, it was a barren place. Moab was just a short distance away, only about 60 miles, but the famine had apparently not affected there. This is just one of the numerous clues to the behind-the-scenes actions of the sovereign God. The land of Israel was in a desperate situation just like God had announced would happen, but the territory of other nearby nations was not affected.

The names of the family are given in verse 2. The head of the family was Elimelech. His name meant “My God is King” (*El = God; melech or melek = king*). There is some irony in his name, since Elimelech's decision to leave Israel indicated his lack of trust in God, his King. His wife's name was Naomi, which signifies a person who is “pleasant, lovely, and delightful.” There is also irony in this name given the way Naomi later describes herself. See verses 20 – 21.

The family is identified as Ephrathites in verse two. Ephrath was the ancient name of Bethlehem (*see Genesis 35:19*). The use of the older name suggests that Elimelech was a member of a well-established family of the town, perhaps part of the local aristocracy. This idea is reinforced when the entire town was stirred by the return of Naomi, who was apparently well-known by everyone.

There is one more essential fact to notice. Verse one indicates that Elimelech and his family entered Moab “to live for a while.” It was to be a temporary sojourn. At the end of verse two, the Hebrew text indicates that they decided to remain there. The verb used in the Hebrew text clearly indicates a change in the original plan. Even though the family was outside the promised land and away from the promises and protection of God, and living among an enemy people who were an abomination to God, they had become comfortable with their surroundings and had settled in for a long duration.

The sons each married Moabite women. This was not specifically prohibited in the Law, although the practice was discouraged and there were restrictions placed on Moabite participation in the assemblies of the Israelites (*see Deuteronomy 23:3*). The two sons apparently had no apprehensions about marrying the Moabite women — no concern about how their actions would displease God. Verse four indicates that their temporary sojourn in Moab lasted about ten years, and would have continued longer except that the sons died.

Within a ten year period, Elimelech, Mahlon, and Kilion were all dead. No explanation is given as the reason for their deaths. According to the Hebrew rabbinic traditions, Elimelech was struck down by the LORD because he had forsaken his homeland and the requirements of the Law. Rabbinic traditions also attributed the deaths of the two sons to judgment for leaving Judah and for marrying non-Jewish women. The Scripture itself is silent about the causes of the deaths, and non-Jewish commentators are divided in their opinions about their deaths. However, everyone agrees that the sovereignty of God can be recognized behind all the other events in this story, so it is likely that God intervened in the lives of the members of this family unit.

After the death of her husband, Naomi would have become the responsibility of her sons. After the death of the sons, Naomi was left in a very precarious situation. Her status as a widow without male children would have been a serious matter in Bethlehem, where she would have been among her own people. Unfortunately, because she was living as an alien in a foreign country, her situation was an even more serious matter for her.

A childless widow was among the most disadvantaged of people in the ancient world. There was no one to protect or support her; she was dependent on the generosity of strangers. It was not culturally acceptable for women to be wage-earners. Many widows were forced into begging. The daughters-in-law were in a similar situation, but at least they were among their own people. Naomi was in a particularly desperate situation.

Naomi seemed to recognize that the LORD had been chastening her family. Notice her comments. To her daughters-in-law she said, in verse 13, “It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has gone out against me!” After she arrived back in Bethlehem, she said to the women, “Don’t call me Naomi (remember, this word means “pleasant” and “delightful”), call me Mara (which means “bitter”) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (*see verses 20-21*).

What application can we make from this introductory segment of the story? Let me answer that question by quoting some familiar verses from the book of Proverbs. These verses will help us lock in on a key thought: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart; and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes: fear the Lord, and depart from evil” (*Proverbs 3:5-7*).

Think about Elimelech. Rather than trusting the Lord in the time of famine, he leaned unto his own understanding and moved his family to Moab. We can commend Elimelech for trying to take care of his family. However, in view of God’s promises and warnings, his decision to relocate to Moab was not justified. The hardships he faced should have driven him to the LORD rather than driven him into the pagan world. As the Bible makes clear, if a person does not cling to God by faith, his fleshly desires will drag him/her away from God.

There was no reason for Elimelech to leave Bethlehem. The famine in the land was not so severe that people perished by it. I say this because many women of the town who knew Naomi before she moved to Moab were still there when she returned. Elimelech did not have enough faith to trust the LORD in the midst of adverse circumstances. In his mind, it was better to move away and make a fresh start rather than renew his faith in God and depend on God to sustain him through his difficulties.

He leaned unto his own understanding, turned his back on the kingdom of God, and led his family away from God. It proved to be a very foolish and costly decision. One of the lessons we can learn from the introduction to this story can be stated very simply: disobedience does not lead to prosperity and success.

Some commentators suggest that Naomi represents the nation of Israel. She had moved away from the land which bore the name of God, lost her relationship with God, and was left bereft, desolate, and bitter. Fortunately, Naomi recognized her need, and prepared to return to Bethlehem. That will be the subject for the next message.