

Ruth 1
November 6, 2016

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

The book of Ruth deserves an introduction. The events in Ruth take place during the days of the Judges (the latter part of the 12th century), which is significant because we need to appreciate the spiritual condition of Israel. Instead of telling you about their spiritual condition, I want to show you. Let's **read Judges 2:6-19**.

Q: How were the Israelites failing spiritually? [First, the generation who was led by Joshua failed to teach their children about the Lord and what He had done for Israel. Second, they did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. Third, they forsook the Lord by following and worshipping various gods. Fourth, they refused to listen to the judges the Lord had raised up. They refused to give up their stubborn ways.]

So the book of Ruth is a breath of fresh air. Instead of reading about more violence and lawlessness, we see tenderness, love, and sacrifice. It is good to know that there are still good people in bad days, and that God is at work, though violence may fill the news. Ruth and Esther are the only OT books named after women. Ruth was a Gentile who married a Jew; Esther was a Jew who married a Gentile; but God used both of them to save the nation. Ruth is placed between Judges and Samuel for a definite reason. Judges shows the spiritual decline of the Jewish nation; Samuel shows the setting up of the Jewish kingdom; and the book of Ruth pictures Christ and His bride. During this present age (aka the "church age,"), Christ is calling out His bride (the church) from among the Gentiles and the Jews. As we shall see, this brief book presents a beautiful foreshadowing of Christ. It is a love story and a harvest story, and that is what God is doing in our world today. Let's begin.

BOOK (NIV 1984): [Read Ruth 1:1-5]

V.1:

- In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

V.2:

- The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

V.3:

- Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.

V.4:

- They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years,

V.5:

- both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Process Observations/Questions:

Note: “In the days when the judges ruled.” That is shorthand for ‘In the days when the Lord’s people forsook Him, rebelled against His rule, did acts of evil and worshipped other gods...’

Q V.1: The author states that there was a *famine in the land*. What land is he referring to? [The Promised Land! This was no ordinary land. It was the land the Lord had promised to give Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:14–17). It was the land the Lord had promised to give his people, the descendants of Abraham, when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt (Exod. 3:8)—the land ‘flowing with milk and honey’. It was the promised fruitful land where food was abundant and where the Lord’s people could enjoy the good life the Lord had prepared for them.]

Q: So what was the probable reason that there was a famine in the land? [The Lord was delivering the consequences of their disobedience. Leviticus 26 contains one of the many warnings the Lord gave his rescued people as he prepared them for life in the Promised Land. There was the promise of blessing as they followed his decrees and were careful to obey his commands (vv. 3–13), including the promise of rain in season, and the ground producing its crops and the trees their fruit. However, there was also the warning of what would happen if they did not listen to the Lord and obey him, one of which was “your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit.”]

Q: So imagine being an Israelite during a time of famine, and you have a family to feed. What are you going to do? [Look for places that aren’t having a famine so your family will survive.]

Q: So what city did they find? [Moab]

Q: What is the significance of Elimelech moving his family to Moab? [This was a city that was started by Lot’s oldest daughter. The relationship between Moab and the Israelites had never been good. It was Balak, king of Moab, who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites (Num. 22–24). The women of Moab then seduced the Israelite men to indulge in sexual immorality and to worship their gods, causing the Lord’s anger to burn against his people (Num. 25). It is no surprise, therefore, that as they entered the Promised Land, the people of Israel were commanded not to make a treaty of friendship with the Moabites (Deut. 23:3–6). The Jews were not supposed to mix with the Moabites]

Q: How long did Elimelech and Naomi believe they would be in Moab? [“a while.”]

Q: Some theologians suggest that Elimelech didn’t spiritually lead his family well by moving them to Moab. They think he should have known better. What do you think? Did he lack trust in God by not staying in Bethlehem, or did he do what he had to do to feed his family? [Let people struggle with this]

Observation V.2: We get introduced to the family and their background, and each name has a meaning. If you have a good study Bible, it will be in your footnotes. What is the meaning of the name:

- Elimelech (“God is my King”)

- Naomi (“pleasantness”)
- Mahlon (“sickly”)
- Kilion (“pining”)

Q V.3-5: While they were living in Moab, Naomi’s sons get married. Who did they marry?
[Moabites – Orpah and Ruth]

Revisit Decision to Move to Moab: This family came to Moab with the idea that they would only be there “a while,” but that didn’t happen. Now we see they are “living there,” which gives the idea that they were there more permanently than not.

Observation: The story changes rather abruptly. Life hits Naomi hard. Her husband and her sons die. We don’t know why, other than it’s implied in her sons’ names that they were sickly.

Transition: Let’s hit the “pause” button. This information shows up abruptly, and I don’t want to gloss over it. Put yourself in Naomi’s shoes.

Q: How might you be feeling? [Grieving, devastated, numb]

Q: If you’ve never been a widow or widower, I bet you know one. As you think about those who are widowed, what have you observed or learned that they need after they lose their spouse?
[Permission to talk about their loved one; companionship; being remembered – after 30 days they feel forgotten; initiate acts of service vs saying something like “Let me know if I can be of help to you.”]

Q: Naomi wasn’t just a widow. She was also a bereaved parent. Have any of you ever experienced the death of a child? Do you know someone who has?

Q: If yes, what have you observed or learned that they need after they lose their child?
[Remember their children with them! If a birthday comes along or Christmas, and we know the parent will think of their children, share with the parent your warm memories of the child and acknowledge that these types of days are difficult for them.]

LOOK:

When our family members or friends are experiencing loss, all of us CAN express our love and concern BY tending to their NEEDS as you go on the journey with them. That’s how we become Jesus with skin on. God takes care of us through the people He puts in our lives.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (Ru 1-4)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

RUTH 1

This is the eighth book in the OT, and eight is the number of new beginning. The events in Ruth take place during the days of the Judges, but what a difference between these two books! Instead of violence and lawlessness, we see tenderness, love, and sacrifice. It is good to know that there are still good people in bad days, and that God is at work in the “corners of the land” though violence may fill the news. Ruth and Esther are the only OT books named after women. Ruth was a Gentile who married a Jew; Esther was a Jew who married a Gentile; but God used both of them to save the nation. Ruth is placed between Judges and Samuel for a definite reason. Judges shows the decline of the Jewish nation; Samuel shows the setting up of the Jewish kingdom; and Ruth pictures Christ and His bride. During this present age, when Israel is set aside, Christ is calling out His bride from among the Gentiles and the Jews. As we shall see, this brief book has a wonderful typical meaning. It is a love story and a harvest story, and that is what God is doing in our world today.

I. Ruth's Sorrow (1)

A. A wrong decision (vv. 1–5).

Why a famine should come to Bethlehem (“house of bread”), we do not know; possibly because of the sins of the people. Instead of trusting God in the land, Elimelech (“God is my king”) and Naomi (“pleasantness”) take their two sons to the land of Moab. Abraham made a similar mistake when he went to Egypt (Gen. 12:10ff). Better to starve in the will of God than to eat the enemy's bread! They plan to “sojourn” briefly, but instead they “continue” until the father and the two sons die. The names of the two sons may reflect the sorrow of their sojourn: Mahlon means “sickly” and Chilion means “pining.” “To be carnally minded is death” (Rom. 8:6). Jews were not to mix with the Moabites (Deut. 23:3), so their wrong decision brought them the discipline of God.

Pentecost, J. D. (1985). Daniel. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 1, pp. 418-419)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

I. Introduction (1:1–5)

The narrative begins with the necessary mention of the time, names, places, and events. The mood was somber and foreboding. A famine forced a family in Bethlehem to move to a foreign land. This situation became an opportunity for God to demonstrate His grace. The unfolding of the story revealed how God providentially worked to meet needs.

A. A tragic sojourn (1:1–2)

1:1. The events recorded in the Book of Ruth occurred in the period of **the Judges**, probably during the administration of the judge Gideon (see “Historical and Literary Features” under *Introduction*). The **famine in the land** was probably God’s acting in judgment on His sinning people. Many years later in Elijah’s day God sent another famine as judgment on Israel for worshipping Baal (1 Kings 16:30–17:1; 18:21, 37; 19:10).

Divine control of the crops was a major factor in the development of events in the Book of Ruth. During the period of the Judges, worship of the Canaanite god Baal was common among the Israelites (Jud. 2:11; 3:7; 8:33; 10:6, 10). Baal was believed to be owner of the land and to control its fertility. Baal’s female counterpart was Ashtoreth. Sexual intercourse between these two gods was believed to regulate fertility of the earth and its creatures.

God had commanded the Israelites under Joshua’s leadership to purge the land of the Canaanites and their idols (Deut. 7:16; 12:2–3; 20:17). The failure of the Israelites to do so (Josh. 16:10; Jud. 1:27–33) left them open to the temptation to look to the idols rather than to God for agricultural blessing. Perhaps the cultic prostitution and sexual practices used in the worship of Baal also enticed the Hebrew people. Interestingly Gideon’s father had built an altar to Baal, but Gideon had destroyed it (Jud. 6:25–34). The Ruth narrative shows the wisdom of trusting in God and His providence rather than in Canaanite gods.

Bethlehem was about five miles south of Jerusalem. Later Obed, son of Ruth and Boaz, was born in Bethlehem and Obed’s grandson David was born in Bethlehem (Ruth 4:18–21; 1 Sam. 17:58). Bethlehem, of course, would also be the birthplace of David’s greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 2:4–7).

A man from Bethlehem decided to take his family to **Moab**, about 50 miles east on the other side of the Dead Sea. He intended to live there for a short period. Nothing is said about why he chose Moab. Probably he had heard that there was no famine there. However, the unfolding events indicate that it was an unwise choice, and that Bethlehem, not Moab, was the place where God would bless him. The inhabitants of Moab were excluded from the congregation of the Lord (Deut. 23:3–6). (On the origin of the Moabites see “Historical and Literary Features” under *Introduction*; cf. Gen. 19:30–38.) They were worshipers of the god Chemosh, a deity whose worship was similar to that of Baal.

1:2. **The man’s name was Elimelech**, his wife was **Naomi**, and their **two sons were Mahlon and Kilion**. Some Bible students make much of the fact that the name Elimelech means “My God is king,” but he may or may not have lived up to his name. (See comments on vv. 20–21 for a wordplay on Naomi’s name.) The term **Ephrathites** was a designation for the inhabitants of Ephrath (also spelled Ephratah and Ephratha), another name for Bethlehem (cf. 4:11; Gen. 35:19; 48:7; Micah 5:2).

B. A depressing emptiness (1:3–5)

1:3. Naomi faced the distressing problem of her husband’s death. How long they had lived in Moab before Elimelech’s death is not known. But Naomi, though widowed, sorrowing, and in a foreign land, had hope while **her two sons** were still alive. Naomi now became the central figure in the narrative.

1:4. Naomi’s two sons **married Moabite women ... Orpah and Ruth**. These marriages were not condemned. Though the Mosaic Law prohibited Israelites from marrying the Canaanites (Deut. 7:3), the Law did not say Israelites could not marry Moabites. However, Solomon’s experience later showed that the greatest problem in such a marriage is the temptation to serve the gods of one’s foreign wife (1 Kings 11:1–6; cf. Mal. 2:11). No doubt orthodox

Israelites would have thought that marrying Moabite women was unwise. The Book of Ruth does not record the length of these marriages but they were childless. Not till Ruth 4:10 does the reader learn which son (Mahlon) married Ruth. **They ... lived in Moab about 10 years** which was probably longer than the family intended to stay (cf. “for a while,” 1:1).

1:5. Then Naomi’s two sons **died**. Jewish tradition has regarded the death of these three males (Elimelech, **Mahlon, and Kilion**) as God’s punishment for their leaving Bethlehem. Though that is possible, the text does not indicate it. **Naomi** had now accumulated a great load of personal grief. **Her husband** and her only **sons** had died before their time. She was a stranger in a foreign land. If the family name were to carry on, there had to be an heir. But having no sons, Naomi **was left without** hope. Her Moabite daughters-in-law offered her no apparent means to an heir.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith (p. 399). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

1:1–2 Moses decreed that Moabites were not permitted, for a period of ten generations, even to enter the Lord’s assembly (Dt 23:3–6), yet Mahlon and Kilion married Moabite women. Naomi’s comment (Ru 1:15) suggests that Ruth and Orpah had been participants in the idol worship of their people. The author merely recorded the fact of the marriages, without indicating that Mahlon and Kilion had acted wisely. Two factors, however, mitigate what appears to be their disregard for Moses’ ordinance. First, a “generation” need not be 100 years (Gn 15:13, 16), requiring a 1000-year period before the expiration of Moses’ prohibition, which had been uttered only some 300 years previously. A generation could refer simply to the time between a person’s birth and the birth of that person’s child. Second, Moses’ prohibition applies to Moabites’ entering the Lord’s assembly (the worship gathering); it did not specifically prohibit marriage with a Moabite woman, since the assembly was predominantly made up of men (cp. Dt 16:16). Moses provided for the possibility that an Israelite might take a woman from another ethnic group as a wife (Dt 21:10–13).

Prime, J. (2007). Opening up Ruth (pp. 20–22, 26-27). Leominster: Day One Publications.

1 Forsaking the Lord and its consequences

(1:1–5) Please also read Judges 2:6–19 and Leviticus 26:3–20

Judges 2:6–19 provides the context for understanding the opening verses of Ruth 1. ‘In the days when the judges ruled’ is shorthand for ‘In the days when the Lord’s people forsook the Lord, rebelled against his rule (each man doing as he saw fit), suffered the consequences and needed a rescuer.’

Judges 2:10–13 shows that the spiritual faithfulness of one generation cannot secure the faithfulness of the next. It is true for a family, for a local church, and for a nation. A following generation may be able to ride on the coat-tails of their ancestors for a while, but it will not be long before their true state is revealed. So it was in the days when the judges ruled.

Judges 2:14–15 sets out the consequences for the Lord’s people of forsaking him. In his anger, God handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around them, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever they went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress. Judges 2:16 then sets out the role of the judges. They were deliverers raised up by the Lord, who saved the people out of the hands of these raiders.

Ruth 1:1–5 helps us to understand three significant truths about living in a world where the Lord and his rule are ignored:

The Lord’s warning of punishment is no idle threat

‘In the days when the judges ruled, *there was a famine in the land.*’ This was no ordinary land. It was the land the Lord had promised to give Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:14–17). It was the land the Lord had promised to give his people, the descendants of Abraham, when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt (Exod. 3:8)—the land ‘flowing with milk and honey’. It was the promised fruitful land where food was abundant and where the Lord’s people could enjoy the good life the Lord had prepared for them.

So why was there a famine in the land? Why was there no food in the land that the Lord had promised would be full of abundant fruit? The answer is that the Lord’s warning of punishment is no idle threat. Leviticus 26 contains one of the many warnings the Lord gave his rescued people as he prepared them for life in the Promised Land. There was the promise of blessing as they followed his decrees and were careful to obey his commands (vv. 3–13), including the promise of rain in season, and the ground producing its crops and the trees their fruit. However, there was also the warning of what would happen if they did not listen to the Lord and obey him. The Lord warned:

But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it. I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you. If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit (Lev. 26:14–20).

Therefore, when, in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, the Lord was acting in accordance with the warning he had given—even in Bethlehem, which means ‘house of bread’. Bethlehem was a fertile place, a place of plenty, where the normally abundant grain harvests provided much to eat. It was a desirable place to live. But the ‘house of bread’ became the ‘house of no bread’, in accordance with the Lord’s warning.

If Bethlehem was a great place for an Israelite to live, Moab was the opposite, or should have been. Moab was not a place to which any God-fearing Israelite would choose to go for a holiday, let alone take their family to live there. The Moabites were descended from Lot, after a sordid incident with his own daughter (see Gen. 19:30–38). The relationship between Moab and Israel had never been good. It was Balak, king of Moab, who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites

(Num. 22–24). The women of Moab then seduced the Israelite men to indulge in sexual immorality and to worship their gods, causing the Lord’s anger to burn against his people (Num. 25). It is no surprise, therefore, that as they entered the Promised Land, the people of Israel were commanded not to make a treaty of friendship with the Moabites (Deut. 23:3–6).

Whether Elimelech knew this we don’t know, but he should have done. One of the Lord’s commands as his people entered the Promised Land was that his law should be read to the people every seven years so that it would not be forgotten (Deut. 31:9–13). The record of Judges indicates that this command was disobeyed. Very soon generations grew up knowing nothing about the Lord and his word. When the Lord’s word is ignored, the Lord and his rule are soon ignored and men, like Elimelech, do as they see fit, to the detriment of themselves and their families.

Elimelech may have intended to live in Moab only ‘for a while’, but ‘they went to Moab and *lived there*’ (v. 2)—or, as it could be translated, ‘remained there’ (ESV). And Elimelech and his boys remained there in more ways than one. The account of their residence in Moab is the story of a funeral, two weddings and two more funerals! Elimelech’s aim may have been to protect himself and his family from death, but he could not cheat death. The boys’ names, Mahlon and Kilion, may be significant. Mahlon means ‘to be sick’. Kilion means ‘failing’ or ‘pining’. They may have been particularly frail children. That may have been behind the decision to go to Moab. But Elimelech could not avoid the date of his own death or that of his sons—as no one can.