

**Redeeming Ruth, week 1**  
**God's Hand in Our Suffering (Ruth 1:1–22)**

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*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.*

— Ruth 1:16b

Elimelech, whose name means “God is my king,” ironically lived without much faith in the sovereign God he professed to worship. He lived in the days of the judges, roughly 1200–1020 BC, between the time of Joshua’s death (Judges 1:1) and the coronation of Saul as king (1 Samuel 10). According to the book of Judges, it was a lengthy season of horrible sin and evil among God’s people. It included what the New Testament calls worldliness, or sin among the lives of God’s people with a greater appetite for sex, wealth, and comfort than for God. There were only a few exceptions, such as Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah.

A famine spread throughout Bethlehem in the days of Elimelech, likely as a judgment from God (2 Kings 8:1; Isaiah 3:1; Jeremiah 14:13–18; Amos 4:6). Bread was hard to come by in a city whose name curiously means “house of bread.” Rather than dealing with the underlying spiritual causes for the toils of life, Elimelech foolishly chose to move his entire family to Moab. Moab was considered a godless place because its citizens descended from Moab, who was the son of incest between the wicked Lot and his own daughter (Genesis 19:30–38). Throughout their history, the Hebrews experienced ongoing hostility with the Moabites in large part because they worshipped a false God named Chemosh rather than Yahweh (Numbers 21:29; 1 Kings 11:7). Tragically, the example of Elimelech shows that as the head of his home, a man affects the welfare of his entire family, for better or worse. He implicates generations to come and the world they will live in with the decisions he makes.

While in Moab, Elimelech and his wife Naomi saw their sons marry Moabite women which, though not technically forbidden in Scripture (Deuteronomy 7:1–4), was frowned upon because the Moabites, as followers of Chemosh, were forbidden from joining God’s people in worship (Deuteronomy 23:3). Nonetheless, as perhaps the only family in Moab that worshipped Yahweh, the sons had few options. So Mahlon (meaning “sickness”) married the Moabite Ruth (cf. Ruth 4:10) and his brother Chilion (meaning “failing” or “dying”) married the Moabite Orpah. Tragically, the father and his two sons died in godless Moab, ironically the very thing they moved there to avoid.

Like much of life, the question of why no children were born in ten years and why further tragedy came is never answered. The scene simply shifts to the widowed Naomi, left with a devastated life and two likewise widowed daughters-in-law, three wounded women knit together by tragedy.

Ruth 1:6 then provides a very important underlying theological revelation. While God is mentioned twenty-three times in the book, this is only one of two occasions where the unknown author directly mentions God (1:6; 4:13). These bookends show God blessing by giving food and a child, while the other twenty-one references to God are on the lips of the various characters in the book. The

providence of God is revealed in this verse and stands as the theme of the entire book and the thread that weaves all of the lives therein together.

Christians have always held that God works through both His visible hand of miracle (e.g., a burning bush, parted sea, visible angel) and His invisible hand of providence, which is only seen by those with faith that gives them eyes to see it at work in their lives. In Ruth, God's hand of miracle is never revealed, but God's hand of providence is continually revealed in the lives of ordinary people and ordinary events such as food, marriage, and children.

In speaking of God's providence, we are confessing that God is *both* sovereign and good to us personally. This means that God not only created us and our world, but also sustains and rules over all creation in general, including the details of our lives. This does not mean that all that happens is God's will, because God is repeatedly grieved and angry at sin throughout Scripture. But it does mean that God is free to do as He pleases, and ultimately works out all things for His glory and our good (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28). It also means that God can and does bring us both blessings, like bread, and what the Puritan John Flavel called "a sanctified affliction," like the death of a loved one (Ecclesiastes 7:13–14). In this mention of God's providence, the book of Ruth finds its first ray of hope in an otherwise dark day, setting the stage for the remainder of the story.

Devastated at the loss of her husband and only sons, Naomi remains determined to run to God's people in her hometown, hoping that God may also pour out His blessing upon her. Along their journey, Naomi pauses to have the first of many dialogues in the book. No less than fifty-five of the eighty-five verses in Ruth contain dialogue, and 678 of the 1,294 words in the book (52.4 percent) are on the lips of the characters. In this dialogue, Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their families because she has no future to offer them. On the other hand, the prospect of remarriage and a new life remain possible for them in Moab.

The women have bonded in love through tragedy to such a degree that Naomi now views them as "my daughters," and so Naomi offers the first of many prayers that will appear throughout the book, asking God to give them husbands (1:8–9; 2:12, 20; 3:10; 4:11–12, 14). By the end of the short book, every single prayer is answered by God. Curiously, not one of the prayers is uttered for someone's own well-being, but rather only for the blessings of God to be bestowed upon others. Theologically, prayer is simply the fruit of providential faith; the one who prays does so trusting that God does hear and can answer.

Naomi's prayer for God to "deal kindly" in verse 8 also introduces an important word that is spoken of as a characteristic of both God (2:20) and Ruth (3:10). That word, *hesed*, is a little word that summarizes the big totality of God's positive attributes, such as love, grace, mercy, kindness, patience, and faithfulness. That word rightly reveals the nature of God and of Ruth who imitates Him.

In the second half of verse 13, the heart of Naomi is revealed as her view of God and her emotions spill out. Despite the fact that her deceased husband's poor leadership and foolish decisions are responsible for much of the devastation in her life, she rightly confesses that even the darkest days of her life were not lived apart from God's providence. Indeed, everything either passes from or through God's hand of providence. Naomi knows that God could have intervened

and changed the course of her life's story but did not, for reasons known only by Him. We can identify with the pain of Naomi who does not have her questions answered by God, but continues to seek Him by moving to where His people and blessing reside as an act of faith amidst her pain.

Perhaps sitting together weeping loudly at the thought of adding the loss of their close friendship to their already devastated lives, Naomi continues to persuade her daughters-in-law to return to their families in Moab rather than journey with her for an uncertain future starting over in a new city. Orpah chooses the ordinary course of reasonable action and returns to her home in hopes of perhaps again falling in love, remarrying, and starting her life over. But Ruth chooses the extraordinary course of faith in what was likely her conversion moment. In her first recorded words in the book, Ruth responds with a faith perhaps even greater than Abraham's. Like Abraham, she in faith left her family and homeland for an uncertain future. Unlike Abraham, God never spoke to her and she rolled the proverbial dice, trusting in the providence of God and somehow knowing that, as Scripture says elsewhere, even the roll of the dice are in the hand of God (Proverbs 16:33). Ruth professes her loyalty to God as one of only three non-Hebrews to do so in the entire Old Testament (the others are Rahab the converted prostitute in Joshua 2:11 and Naaman in 2 Kings 5:15–17). She also vows herself to Naomi even in death, thereby pledging a life in which her geography, theology, and genealogy would be fully entrusted to the providential hand of God. She did all of this despite the fact that she was a Moabite who would likely face racism and constant danger in Israel, with only the help of an old, broke, lonely, and bitter woman. Ruth's decision shows that in the new birth of conversion we are given a second family that is sometimes more precious and helpful than our family of birth.

The first chapter concludes with few details of Ruth and Naomi's roughly fifty-mile journey from Moab to Bethlehem, a place pregnant with meaning; it is where Jesus would be born, as promised in Micah 5:2. They arrive in late spring or early summer, perhaps in April, during a season of hope, bounty, and joy as the famine is over and the *hesed* of God has come.

Upon their arrival, the women in town who have not seen Naomi for many years are abuzz and curious to know how she has fared over the years. Naomi informs them that although her name means "pleasant" or "sweet," God's providential hand has made her life hard and her disposition Mara, or "bitter." Many have stood at a distance to criticize Naomi's bitterness. But if we are honest we must confess that at varying seasons of our lives, we can sympathize with her emotional state. She married a fool who led her to Moab where she had no family, friends, or fellowship. Her sons married godless women. Her husband died. Her sons died as well, without leaving her even one grandchild. She descended from an affluent woman to a devastated, broke, bitter old woman with no chance of remarriage, children, or job skills to even put food on her table—a picture of desperation and loss rivaling Job.

Nonetheless, Naomi is to be admired for her brutal honesty. Unlike so many phony religious types, she speaks frankly and truthfully about her heart and does so publicly among God's people to whom she has run in hopes of being sanctified by the *hesed* of God and His people. In Naomi we see that although we may each arrive at a place of bitterness, God invites us to be honest with Him and

those in our church family if there is to be any hope of sanctification so that there is joy at the end of our mourning.

**Verses for next week:** Ruth 2:1–13