

## Ruth: An [Extra]Ordinary Love Story, “Should I Stay or Should I Go?”, 11/21/21

**Blank Slide** Announce **Terry Foester [Picture]**, new Pastor of Church Mobilization and Groups Google Earth. Now if you aren't familiar with this technology, Google used GPS and extraordinary satellite imagery to get up close views of almost every location in the entire world. Let me show you...**[VIDEO]** doesn't it give you a sense of how seemingly insignificant we are? **[Title Slide]** We are just an infinitesimally small dot on this spinning rock...our lives seem so insignificant and ordinary when we consider the billions of people and thousands of years of human history... and yet God considers us incredibly significant and wants to take our ordinary lives and placed in his hands do something extraordinary. God is not only intimately engaged in the big moments of history, events and people but in the everyday lives of each one of us. This is one of the key reasons God gave us this little story called Ruth. If we took this technology back to 1000BC in the middle east, setting of this book it would be all pixelated, few homes, lots of dirt roads, barren land and a few fields with few if any labels. You think Delaware is insignificant? This was a very ordinary, insignificant place call Bethlehem. Now of course, that's a big deal to us now as the birthplace of Jesus, which plays into what makes this story so extraordinary, but it wasn't then. As we will see, the characters Ruth and Naomi become poor widows that the world had forgotten. And yet, through their ordinary lives placed in God's hands He writes an extraordinary love story. This story is for everyone who feels forgotten, ever feels insignificant, or cast aside, who ever feels like God would never use you. He sees you and loves you. And as extraordinary of a love story it is, it's only a shadow of the story it points to- another Bethlehem, another poor, ordinary girl, who gives birth to the most extraordinary person to ever live- The Lord Jesus Christ.

**Ruth 1:1** *In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.* This was a 400-year period after Israel entered the promised land under Joshua and before there were any kings in Israel (roughly 1500 BC to 1100 BC). The book of Judges comes just before Ruth in our English Bibles and you can see from its very last verse what sort of period it was. **Judges 21:25 says, *In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.*** It was a very dark time in Israel. 2 Chronicles 15 The Message. *At that time, it was a dog-eat-dog world. Life was constantly up for grabs. No one knew what the next day might bring. Nation battered nation. City pummeled city. And God let loose every kind of trouble among them.* That sums up the era of the book of Judges. So the first verse of Ruth lets us know during the bleakest time, God was doing one of the brightest things. **[Ruth 1:1 Slide]** Now it would not have been a surprise that there was a famine land. Certainly, famines can happen for natural reasons or geopolitical reasons like war and the devastation it does to the land...but there is good reason to believe this famine was the result of God's discipline. In the covenant God made with Israel he promised blessing for faithfulness (including provision for the land, rains, crops), but for unfaithfulness there would be disciplines (including withholding rains, crop production and food shortages). The families of Israel knew what was going on and the heart response should have been repentance and return to trusting the Lord. But we meet a family that doesn't respond that way.

Ruth 1:1b-2 *So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.<sup>2</sup> The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion.* There is a fascinating and ironic study of names in Ruth. Bethlehem means "House of Bread" and yet there is no bread in this house. Instead of staying and turning to the Lord to provide, they run from God to greener pastures...or so it seems...in Moab. Moab was east of the Jordan river, in modern day Jordan. Moab means "He is of my father" - A name that was a stark reminder of the origin of this people- the Moabites were the descendants of an incestuous relationship between a drunken Lot and his daughter. They worshipped a false god named Chemosh and he was worshipped often through child sacrifice. They were often an enemy of Israel over their history. This is important because for a Jewish family, leaving the Promised Land for Moab was a slap in the face of God and his people. Elimelech- "My God is King" but does not act as if God is king. Sinclair Ferguson- "Instead of turning back to the Lord, this little family turn their backs on the Lord." Elimelech did "what was right in his own eyes." The name irony continues: His wife's name is Naomi which means sweet, but as we will see her life is anything but sweet. But my favorite of all are Mahlon and Kilion which mean Weakly and Sickly- which foreshadows what is about to happen.<sup>3</sup> *Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.<sup>4</sup> They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years,<sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.*

In an incredibly devastating turn of events, tragedy strikes this family. All the men die, leaving three widows in a godless, patriarchal land where a woman's worth was in their husbands and the bearing of children, particularly males...and sadly both Ruth and Orpah struggled with infertility for 10 years. Scholars call Naomi the female Job, but as a man, Job at least had the advantage of rebuilding. One author, "Naomi as a post-menopausal woman with two foreign daughters-in-law? She's finished." At least from a human vantage point...except when we place our lives in the hands of God. In the pit of despair, grief and disillusionment, Naomi gets her first glimpse of the kindness of God.

**Ruth 1:6-7** *<sup>6</sup> When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. <sup>7</sup> With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.*

Naomi makes the decision to seek help and hope in the Lord and His covenant people. She likely didn't have a choice to leave Israel in the first place, but now we will choose and she turns toward God instead of away from Him.

**Ruth 1:8-13** *<sup>8</sup> Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. <sup>9</sup> May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud <sup>10</sup> and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."*

*<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?" <sup>12</sup> Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband.*

*Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— <sup>13</sup> would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!"*

Now what is she referring to? She's referring to an ancient custom in patriarchal cultures, the law of levirate marriage in Semitic cultures in the ancient Middle East. If a man had a wife, and that man dies without children, there's no one to perpetuate the family name, so a brother of that deceased man would do the courtesy of having a child through that man's wife to perpetuate the family name. We think of that as scandalous, but in those days it was considered an honorable duty. Naomi is basically saying, if you come with me, any chance of a happy, honorable life is over. Being a widow is tough in any generation. Any widow here would say "Amen" to that. It's hard. But being a poor, immigrant widow, with no male in the family in ancient times? No one signs up for that. There's not really a decision to make for these girls—you go home. It's your best chance.

**[Title Slide]** Now zoom out our Google Earth lens again- In the grand scheme of things, these are three destitute widows standing on the side of a dirt road in nowhereville, no one cares what they do. But from God's vantage point, this decision is far more significant in redemptive history than what comes out of the White House. Because if Ruth doesn't go with Naomi to Israel the magi never visit the Savior in Bethlehem. But I'm giving spoilers to the story so I will stop there. Ordinary people that God is using to write an extraordinary love story. Never think your decisions don't matter, they do!

*<sup>14</sup> At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye.* Now from a human vantage point Orpah made the wise choice- go back home to your own country and try to start over, no one can blame her for that. But because of her decision for self-preservation and instead of turning toward God like Naomi did in her mess, she misses out on one of the greatest redemption stories. This is the last time her name shows up again.

**Ruth 1:15-18** *but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup> "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." <sup>16</sup> But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.*

*Your people will be my people and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." <sup>18</sup> When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.*

Ruth- whose name means friendship lives up to her name and so much more. Her words are one of the most beautiful pictures of covenant love in Scripture. In a wedding, read these vows just a couple weeks ago. She says "I'm all in." This is a one-way ticket. I'm leaving behind my hopes and dreams and gods, and old ways- I am trusting your God and your people. This is all-in, risk-taking, real-deal faith in the God of Israel. Wow.

**Ruth 1:19** *So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"*

Now you can imagine the stir, especially in a small community. If suddenly a family who left publicly at Brandywine under not-so-great circumstances suddenly walked back through these doors alone, looking disheveled and dejected, I'm sure there would be some conversation.

**Ruth 1:20-21** <sup>20</sup> *"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. <sup>21</sup> 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."*

Now what do we make of her response? Sometimes I hear preachers who are too critical of her, but I would say, "Oh yeah? Walk in her shoes and then see what you would be saying." I think it's honest and raw. Her life stinks. This is a woman processing her grief out loud, not hiding it behind churchy smile. It's also the response of some who believes God is real, is powerful and engaged in the lives of His people. I'll take her response any day over a lot of the fake, thoughtless things I hear people say about God. But her view of God is skewed. She believes God is God but she's doubting if God is good because of her bad circumstances. Clearly God is punishing me, he doesn't love me, he's being cruel... Maybe you can relate when you look at your circumstances, you say- how can God be good? How can anything good come from this?

Let me borrow an illustration from Lon Solomon **Blank Slide** Naomi was looking at her life like a half-baked cake. By themselves, the ingredients of a cake aren't so good. 3 Cups of Flour- anyone what to eat a cup of flour? In inedible. 1 Tbsp Baking powder- yum. 2 sticks of butter- butter by itself? ½ tspn salt- swallowing ocean water, 1 ¼ cup sugar- burn your throat for a week, 4 raw eggs, maybe if you are Rocky...1 tbsp vanilla extract- by itself nasty, cup of heavy cream. You throw all that in a mixer- you want a spoon full of it yet? Gross, put it in a pan in the oven, you look in half-way it's still just a blob of gook, hard to imagine anything tasty is going to come out of that. Naomi is looking at all the ingredients that have gone into her life circumstances- famine, leaving her home country, losing her husband, losing her sons, no grandchildren, arriving back in Bethlehem destitute and she comes to the conclusion- this is inedible- God's not good to me and he must not love me or care. But the **cake is only half-baked!** She looks at her life and can't imagine anything good coming out of it.

Friends- Many of us can relate to Naomi today. You wonder where God is because you haven't heard from him and sensed His presence. You have experienced one tragedy after another and it's wearing down your faith and you are like, "You know I could go for a name change to Mara

too." Maybe you are trying to wait on God through a season of depression, a battle with illness, for a spouse, or a child, or a promotion or for your son or daughter to come back to faith, or your marriage to get better and you are trying to do it God's way but you are beginning to doubt if God is good and can be trusted. Maybe you have train wrecked your life through a series of bad decisions or addictive behaviors and you feel like it's just too late for you. Maybe you just can't imagine that anything extraordinary could ever come out of your ordinary life. Maybe you believe He's God but you are doubting whether he is good or if he loves you. You are looking at the messy, blob of dough that are your circumstances and you can't make any sense out of it. But the cake is only half-baked! When we place our messy ingredients in his hands, he can bring something extraordinary out of it. For some of us that starts with just turning toward him in faith with your mess instead of trying to handle it on your own or running away from him.

By 1999 I had made quite a mess of life. In fact I remember my high school Science teacher telling me before graduation that I was always going to be a screw up and I would never amount to anything. And then through a series of tragedies I began seeking God (or better he was seeking me) and I gave my life to Christ. And if I looked at the ingredients of my circumstances: addictive behavior, chronic lying, sexual sin, anger issues, extreme self-centeredness, no direction and few aspirations? I can work with this. I continue to be amazed at what God can do with my mess.

The ingredients in Jesus' life didn't look so good as he carried the wood of the cross up Calvary's Hill to die. He was betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends, he was rejected by the people he came to love, serve, and save, he was beaten and mocked. He felt forsaken by the Father as he took his final breath on the Cross. He died and was buried in a tomb. His followers were huddled in fear, defeat, and disillusionment. It looked like a mess...but the cake was only half-baked! Jesus arose from the grave that first Easter morning with power. What the enemy meant for evil, God turned it for good- for our salvation. I want to challenge you this morning- how are you looking at the circumstances of your life today? Instead of saying Mara, I want you to look at your life right now and say, "With God, the cake is only half-baked." You can trust him. It might not turn out like you want, in the timing you want, but when we let him do the baking, something extraordinary can happen. For some of you, the first and most important step is to turn to Jesus in faith.