

The Book of Ruth: Introduction and Setting (Ruth 1:1-5)

Today we begin a journey through the short OT book of Ruth. As I usually do when beginning a book study, I'd like to look at some introductory matters pertaining to the book. It's good to get a bird's eye view of the whole book before diving into the details. Let's look at the forest before we begin looking at the trees.

The book of Ruth is a classic short story. Some people call it the best short story ever written. Many who are familiar with the book would agree that it is a delightful piece of literature, a true-to-life story beginning with great tragedy but ending with great joy. It's only four chapters long and deals with only a few characters. The circumstances of the story reveal the personal character of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz.

And there's good reasons to believe the work is historically accurate and true, not a work of fiction or legend. It describes real experiences of real people in real times at real places.¹

Contents: Ruth is the story of a Gentile woman who displays incredible faith and loyalty in a time of apostasy and rebellion. Ruth is a bright spot in the life of Israel; she stands in stark contrast against a dark background of national irresponsibility. With everyone doing what seemed right in his own opinion (Jud 21:25), we may be surprised that a foreigner displays such godly actions and attitudes. In the midst of divine judgment, we find an example of love and loyalty in the life of a Moabite woman. Ruth stands as something of a rebuke to the rebellious and stubborn Jews of the time. Ruth is like a rose among the thorns, a little light shining in a dark corner. She's a good example for us to follow today.

Quote: The Book of Ruth demonstrates that the lights of God's grace and human integrity still shone in the small rural community of Bethlehem.²

Most of us know the plot of the book. Ruth was a Moabitess who married a Hebrew man who was living temporarily in Moab. After he died, Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, migrated back to Bethlehem in Israel. There, God providentially provided a husband, a home, and a family. Ruth became the great-grandmother of King David, and thus an ancestor of Jesus.

¹ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 603.

² Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 589.

Quote: Though God appears hidden throughout the story, he, rather than Naomi, Ruth, or Boaz, [is] the key figure in the book (Rudolph) and the “primary actor in the drama” (Campbell). ... “[W]ith virtually his every word, the author is endeavoring to present the providence of God” (p. 8).³

The book of Ruth is a story of a great reversal. A destitute woman overcomes her problems and finds happiness. A pagan foreigner becomes part of the most famous family in Israel. Two empty women become full. So it’s quite a reversal, and it all depends on God’s providence. The book gives us hope that God can do the same for us if we trust in him and display the same kind of personal character as we see in Ruth and Boaz.

Purpose/Theme: The book ends by stating the genealogy of King David, so we have to assume that the book is giving the interesting family history of David. Perhaps the book was written to gain support for David’s dynasty.

The book also displays God’s sovereign control over all events, even seemingly trivial ones. God providentially guides the affairs of man. In particular, God cares for those who trust in him, even if those people are Gentiles. The theme of the book is: God demonstrates His faithfulness by loving, superintending, and providentially caring for His people.⁴

Quotes: [Ruth] is the story of how God in His providence (putting the right people in the right place at the right time for the right purpose) preserved and perpetuated the Messianic line during the darkest days in Israel’s history.⁵ The author’s aim is to explain how, in the providence of God, the divinely chosen King David could emerge from the dark period of the judges.⁶ God works in a mysterious way his wonders to perform and his goals to achieve.⁷

The book of Ruth is inspired Scripture; as such, we must consider what the book tells us about God and about ourselves. What are we to do in response to this story? How does this story change us? How can we be faithful and loyal like Ruth was? These are the questions we need to ask ourselves as we study the book—what can I learn from it? We want to apply the timeless principles found in the book to ourselves and our lives. It’s more than just another romantic story with a happy ending.

³ F. B. Huey Jr., “Ruth,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 513.

⁴ The statement of the theme is likely not original with me; I’m not sure where I found this statement.

⁵ Scott Estell, “Ruth Series.” <https://faithwaybaptist-ypsilanti.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Ruth-series.pdf>

⁶ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 595.

⁷ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 615.

Author: Who wrote the book? The book is anonymous. Jewish tradition ascribes it to Samuel or perhaps Nathan. We know that Samuel died before David became the king, so it seems unlikely that Samuel was the author. No one knows who wrote it. The events described would have happened around 1000 BC, but the story could have been written sometime after that.

Key Words: redemption (23 times) and kindness (*hesed*) or “covenant loyalty.” Although kindness is found only three times in the book (1:8; 2:20; 3:10), it is a prominent idea emphasizing the importance of loyalty. This word describes God’s kindness and grace toward His people and that which should exist between believers. God, Ruth, and Boaz repeatedly display this kind of loyal love. Godly character is more important than ethnicity or citizenship. The Book of Ruth is a testimony to the blessing that comes to those who will live in faithful covenant relationship with God (*hesed*).⁸

Levirate Marriage and the Kinsman-Redeemer: The book of Ruth revolves around two rather obscure OT practices, the first of which is levirate marriage. In levirate marriage, if a woman got married and had no children before her husband died, a brother of the dead man – i.e., the widow’s brother-in-law (*levir* is Latin for brother-in-law)—could marry the widow and “raise up seed” in the name of the dead man, thus preserving the dead man’s family line.

In the case of the kinsman-redeemer, if someone fell into poverty, a relative could redeem (i.e., buy) that person’s responsibilities and cancel his debt. Naomi’s poverty apparently required that she sell a field she owned. Boaz bought Naomi’s property, and with it came the responsibility of perpetuating the family line of Ruth’s dead husband. Boaz combined the duties of both the *levir* and the kinsman-redeemer.

The book of Ruth shows us that the events of our lives are not simply random, chance occurrences. God is actively working out His plan in the lives of those who have come to rest under his wings. Normally, God works behind the scenes in subtle ways, providing what we need at the right time. And God consistently extends His grace to unworthy sinners like us. In light of these great truths, we should live responsible, obedient lives like Boaz and Ruth did.

With that introduction, we can now turn to the text itself. This morning, I want us to consider the first five verses, which describe the setting of the book, and in particular, they deal with the disaster that befell Elimelech, Naomi, and their sons in Moab.

⁸ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 598.

Introduction and setting of the book of Ruth

I. The times .1a

A. It happened during the time of the Judges.

1. Remember that the judges ruled Israel during a time of chaos and rebellion. There was no king in Israel, and everybody did what was right in his own eyes.
2. If you read through the book of Judges, you'll find all kinds of odd and disturbing things going on. There's evidence of idolatry, gross immorality, and disobedience among the Jewish people.
3. So this is the setting of Ruth. It's a time of moral chaos and rebellion. Some people are living obediently according to the OT law, but many are living in idolatry and immorality.

App: Their time is much like ours. Ours is a time of rebellion and immorality. Many people are doing whatever they think is right in their own opinion. Very few—just a remnant—seem to be living according to the guidelines of God's word. Even those who claim to be the people of God often live chaotic, disobedient lives.

In times like these, godly character shines most brightly. Even a little light is noticeable when everything around is darkness. Jesus instructs us to be like salt and light in this dark world. Paul instructs us to shine forth the word of life in a dark and dying world (Phil 2:15-16). Instead of being like the chaotic and irresponsible world around us, we must be stable and faithful as we seek to obey God's word.

B. It happened during a time of famine.

1. The text tells us that there was a famine, but it does not say why the famine happened. We know that famine in the Bible is often a sign of God's judgment (cf. Deut 11:16-17, 28:23-24; Lev 26:18-20).
2. God promised great prosperity to his people if they would obey his law. They would receive the early and the latter rains, and that would give them abundant crops.
3. But God also warned the people that famine would strike if they failed to obey his law. God directly threatened to "shut up the heavens so there would be no rain" if the people were disobedient and rebellious.

4. So the presence of this famine implies that Israel as a nation was deeply engaged in sin. God probably sent the famine as a judgment on the people. It's also interesting that over in Moab, less than 100 miles away, there was no famine.
5. The proper response to famine was national repentance (Deut 30:1-3, 8-10). The fact that God did not end the famine implies that there was no national repentance.

App: Again, we see some parallels here to our own situation. America is not Israel. Our nation does not have a covenant relationship with God like Israel did. The biblical promises and threats applied directly to Israel, not to other countries.

However, there is a general sense in which a country prospers to the degree that it upholds basic moral standards. Our nation has prospered, in part, because we have historically followed biblical standards of morality and decency. America has never been perfect, but it historically has endorsed standards of morality. Our leaders have had a basic commitment to Christian virtues, although we've always fallen short of the ideal. Until recently, the vast majority of our citizens have professed to be Christians.

I believe that America, as a nation, is ripe for God's judgment. It may not be famine, but we clearly deserve some kind of judgment for our rebellion and disobedience. God can certainly bring judgment on our land through natural disasters. In fact, we often call these natural disasters "acts of God" (e.g., recent hurricane). As a nation, we deserve to fall under God's judgment. We should not be surprised if God sends great disasters upon our nation. When that happens, the right response is national repentance.

Do you suppose the current crop of government leaders would ever suggest that our nation needs to repent and return to God? Hardly. Frankly, the only hope for our country is a widespread national repentance and revival. If that doesn't happen, I believe our country is doomed.

Trans: These were perilous times for the nation of Israel, largely due to national sin and lack of repentance.

II. The people .1b-2

- A. a Jewish man and his wife—Elimelech and Naomi
- B. They were from Bethlehem, just a few miles south of Jerusalem. It's kind of ironic that the word "Bethlehem" means "house of bread." But during this famine, the house of bread had no bread.
- C. They had two sons—Mahlon and Chilion.
- D. They were Ephrathites. Remember that Bethlehem is often called Bethlehem Ephratah. Ephratah was the region around Bethlehem.

III. The place

- A. It happened in Moab. Moab is a country on the east side of the Dead Sea, a little south of Judah. So from Bethlehem, Elimelech and his family would have had to journey across the Jordan river at the north end of the Dead Sea and then south a bit. Where they ended up may have been only about 50 miles from Bethlehem.
- B. Moab was an enemy of Israel, as were most of the surrounding countries. But people from these countries often migrated or visited one another without much problem. If there were a famine in one part of the land, people would move to a place where there was still food.
- C. The Moabites were wicked idolaters. They worshipped a false god named Chemosh, and they even sacrificed their children as part of their religion. God places a curse on the Moabite people in Deut 23, prohibiting them from entering the assembly of the Lord, even unto the 10th generation. "You shall not seek their peace or prosperity all your days forever" (Deut 23:6). The Moabites oppressed the people of Israel during the time of the judges (Jud 3:12f). All things considered, Moab might not have been the best place for an Israelite to live.
- D. .1b Elimelech took his family to Moab seeking relief from the famine. The text tells us that the man "went to sojourn in the country of Moab." That suggests that his intent was to stay in Moab temporarily, just until the famine ended. He intended to wait out the famine in Moab and then move back to Judah. They were not planning to become citizens of Moab; they were there temporarily.

- E. What made Elimelech take this rather radical step, to leave Israel and go live with the pagan enemies of the Jews? It must have been something fairly important. Perhaps he was facing economic ruin because of the famine. If he were a farmer or shepherd, he could lose everything in a famine. Maybe this was his last resort, the only option that seemed reasonable.
- F. Why did he choose Moab of all places? Why not one of the other countries bordering Israel? Moab is probably the closest place to go where there was no famine. Given all the circumstances, it probably appeared to Elimelech that Moab was the best place to sojourn until the famine passed.
- G. And once they arrived in Moab, they decided to stay for a while. .2end *And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.* The word “continued” literally means “lived,” but the word suggests that they were no longer sojourning; they were living there a bit more permanently. They had come to sojourn, but now they were continuing in Moab. It must have been a fairly pleasant place to live, and they started putting down roots.
- H. Was moving to Moab a good decision? Or was Elimelech guilty of failing to trust in God to provide for them in Judah? Was leaving Israel during a time of famine a reasonable choice? The author of the book does not make a judgment on this decision; he simply tells us what happened. But what happens next seems to imply that it was not a good decision.

App: Families today often have to make difficult decisions. Do we endure a difficult situation or do we leave? Do we trust that God will provide for us in the midst of problems, or do we seek greener pastures elsewhere? Should we ever move to a place of spiritual darkness where people don’t know the Lord? If we move, what will be the results for our children?

Before making a major move, every family should very carefully weigh the pros and the cons—the costs and the benefits. You don’t want to seek greener grass elsewhere, only to find more problems in the new place. It’s probably not a good idea to move to a place that is spiritually dark and pagan. You must consider the effects of the move on your family.

Trans: We don’t know whether Elimelech and Naomi considered all these things, but we do know what happened next.

IV. The disaster .3-5

- A. .3 Elimelech died and Naomi was left with her two sons. The author tells us what happened, but he doesn't give us any details.

Did Elimelech die from a disease? From an accident? From a crime? We don't know. The reason for his death is apparently not significant to the story. The author doesn't tell us why this happened, so we should probably not speculate about it.

.3end The author tells us that Naomi "was left." These words often pertain to bereavement at the death of others. Naomi was now bereft of her husband and now she would be dependent on her two sons.

App: Tragedies like this are almost universal. We are surrounded by death. Almost every day, we hear reports of death. We hear reports of death through disease, disasters, and human violence; it's all around us. Eventually, all of us will experience death.

The big question about death is: are you ready for it? What if your name were listed among those who have died? What happens when your name shows up in the obituary section of the newspaper? When we hear about human death, it should remind us that we are all mortal.

- B. .4 Naomi and her sons decide to stay in Moab, and eventually the sons married Moabite women—Orpah and Ruth.

These details tell us something about this family. Deut 7:3 and 23:3 prohibited the Israelites from marrying the pagan citizens of the surrounding countries. Marrying foreign, pagan wives would lead the Jews into idolatry. We can assume that Orpah and Ruth were both idolaters who worshipped the Moabite false god, Chemosh. This kind of mixed marriage was prohibited by the OT law. Unfortunately, it was quite common during the time of the Judges.

Did the women convert to the worship of Yahweh when they married the two boys? Again, the author doesn't tell us. We can only speculate regarding the spiritual life of these two men. It could be that the two apostatized and became idolaters. Many Israelites were guilty of idolatry at this time. Or the women may have converted. We simply don't know.

.4end The text tells us that the family lived in Moab for about 10 years. That is a substantial amount of time, and perhaps the family had begun to think that they would be there permanently. Things must have been going well enough for the family to stay put in Moab.

Then the story takes another turn; further disaster strikes.

C. .5 Naomi's sons died, and Naomi was left with her two daughters-in-law.

1. Again, we have no details here. Why did these men die? We simply don't know. Traditionally, Jewish people would have seen the deaths of the father and the two sons as a sign of God's judgment. Perhaps God was punishing the two boys for intermarriage with pagans. We don't know.

It's also interesting that the two sons had no children. This happened across the span of about 10 years, so there would have been plenty of time for these two marriages to produce children.

So now we've had the death of the men and no children for the women. That begins to look a lot like God's judgment. The author doesn't specifically tell us that these things happened because of God's displeasure, but it certainly seems to be a possibility.

2. In any case, the result is that these three widows are now all that is left of the family. In that culture, the men of the family provided for the needs of the family. Women typically did not work outside the home. So when all the men had died, it left the women virtually without means of making a living and with no protection. This was a dire situation. What would these women do? What is the solution to their predicament? The rest of the book tells us what happened.

These five verses set the stage for the rest of the story. With this understanding of the background and setting, we are now ready to consider the choices these women have to make.

These five verses contain several important choices.

1. Elimelech chose to flee the famine and sojourn in Moab.
2. Naomi chose to stay in Moab after her husband died.
3. The two sons chose to marry Moabite women.

We don't know the details pertaining to these decisions, but we know the outcome of these choices.

This story highlights the importance of careful decision making. We should weigh the pros and cons—the costs and benefits—of important decisions, especially those that will affect the entire family. Christian families ought to consider not only the *practical* pros and cons of their decisions, but also the *spiritual* pros and cons.

Parents make decisions that will affect their children. Children will usually form relationships with the people around them. If you don't want your children to marry pagans, don't put your children in that kind of environment.

Families have to make important decisions, often without knowing what the results will be. Will moving to another place bring prosperity or disaster? Life or death? We don't know the outcome, but we can trust God in our decisions. We can make the best possible decision and then trust God for the outcome.

If our intent is to submit ourselves to God in the decision, and to make the best possible decision for the wellbeing of our family, I don't think we'll go far wrong. When making decisions, we must put God first, ask for his blessing, and submit to his will. Then we take into consideration what would most likely have the best outcome, and we make the decision and trust God to work things out for us.

Even when we try to make the best decisions, we are not guaranteed to avoid disaster and death. We live in a fallen world; we live in perilous times. But if we submit ourselves to God and seek his will—if we seek first the kingdom of God—then we can be confident that God will direct our steps. Cf. Prov 3:5-6 “Trust in the Lord...”

We'll take our leave of Naomi and her two daughters-in-law for the moment. Disaster has struck, and the three women are left with virtually no means of support or protection. Naomi and her family went from the frying pan into the fire. They were fleeing disaster in one place and found death in another. Now they faced potential destitution. Things were looking pretty bleak for this trio of desperate women. What's going to happen next? Tune in next time for another installment of the exciting story of Ruth.