

## Ruth 1: Hope in Suffering

### INTRODUCTION

Grab your Bibles and open them up to **Ruth 1**. We are going to be taking a break from the book of Judges for the next few months, kind of. I say kind of, because the book of Ruth opens with the phrase *In the days when the judges ruled*. So while we are moving to a different book, with a different flavor, we are not actually moving to a different time period. This means that I can basically skip doing a historical introduction to Ruth because we have been doing it for the last 6 months. The land is in chaos, every man does what is right in his own eyes.

As we have moved through Judges, we have witnessed larger than life characters, but now we view the land of Israel under a microscope. We go from viewing the nation as a whole, to looking at the life of a single family in the midst of it. This is necessary for us, because most of us will not lead large armies, destroy foreign nations, or kill 600 people with an oxgoad. ALL of us have the opportunity to live a quiet life to the glory of God. So in many ways, the book of Ruth serves to humanize the time of the Judges. Real people were living real lives amongst the chaos.

But Ruth does more than humanize the chaos, it also serves to personalize God. I am not talking about making the God of the universe our own personal Jesus. But Ruth serves as a reminder to us that the God who spoke the world into existence, who set the stars ALL OF THEM, in their course, the God who is raising up nations and destroying others, is also actively at work in the lives of individuals. Not just in the hearts of heroes, but in the plain, ordinary dealings of plain, ordinary people. Which serves to make our lives a little less plain. We can no longer sit back saying: I'm no hero. We need to ask what God is working out in our lives, and what He may be calling us to. So let's go:

### WHY WE SUFFER

*In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. v. 1-5*

Life can turn on a dime. In one moment you can be going in this direction, and all of a sudden, you find yourself over here, and you wonder...How did I get here? For Type A personalities, that is an easy question: I made a goal, figured out how to get there and after completing the numerous checklists made, adjusted to account for unforeseen variables, I find myself here. That is part of it. Your decisions, the numerous choices that you make each and every day have served to bring you here. There are decisions in life that you can look back to, put your finger on, knowing that the answer to THAT question, the path chosen at that moment, has altered the course of your history. But there are other defining moments that seem to have chosen you. Circumstances beyond your control that put you in a place where you have no choice but to react to what is happening. We see both of these things at play in these first 5 verses to bring Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah into a place of suffering. Our place in life can never be reduced down to good/bad choices, nor can they be passed off on circumstances alone, the two work together to form the path we walk in this life.

### **Choices and Circumstances**

As we open up the book of Ruth we see these two life shaping factors affecting the lives of this family. There is a famine; this is a devastating predicament. In our culture we may talk of droughts, bad years for certain crops, but what this means is that the price will go up a bit in the grocery store or our food will be flown in from a bit further away. In an agrarian society, famine means PEOPLE DIE. This is no small predicament that Elimelech and his family face. Elimelech makes the sensible choice in a time of famine. There is no food here, there is food over there. He leaves God's people, he leaves the Promised Land, to go where things are better.

The place he chooses is Moab. Now Moab is not a neutral in relation to God. They may have had food, but they also had heaps of idolatry and a less than smooth history with Israel.

1. They were the descendants of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter.

**(Genesis 19)**

2. They Israelites were commanded by God not to form a treaty or friendship with them due to their unwillingness to help Israel in the wilderness (**Deuteronomy 23.3-6**)

3. As recently as **Judges 3**, we have seen the Moabites at war with the people of Israel, Eglon, the fat calf king.

Elimelech's decision seems to be confined to the realm of practical consideration: we NEED food. Our lives would be much better if we were over there. The grass is greener in Moab...for a time. The boys grow up and decide to marry local girls. This is not a good partnership, as we saw from

Deuteronomy. Elimelech's choices also led Naomi to be helpless in a foreign country. The deaths of her husband and sons circumstances, but the resulting pain was magnified by personal decisions.

Here stand three widows, and being a widow was a difficult enough situation during this time, but here you have Naomi, who is a stranger in the land, and two girls, Ruth and Orpah, who most likely would have been ostracized the moment that they took Israelite husbands. They have been put into this position by a mix of their own choices, the decisions of those close to them, and circumstances beyond their control, but what is most important is how they respond:

#### HOW WE SUFFER

*Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*

*And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. 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. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. v.*

*So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"*

*So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. 6-22*

As the three widows ponder what to do next, they offer us three responses to the pain of suffering: GET BITTER, GET BETTER, GET HUMBLE.

### **Get bitter**

Naomi's response to the suffering is to weep. When things go bad in our lives, this IS a faithful response. The death of a child, being diagnosed with cancer, losing your job, these are painful/fear-filled situations, and we do no one any good by pretending that we are fine. We are sometimes told that we are to hold a stiff upper lip, quote verses, and walk around with our heads held high because God is working all things together for good. While that is true, we don't have the benefit of seeing how it works out, there is still the tinge of pain in the moment, we still have the feeling of fear and hopelessness, and let's not forget that Jesus Christ, wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. You are not more holy because you can give a theological assessment of what is going on.

At the same time, you do need to move past it. You can't allow your pain and suffering to define you. If you do, you develop what is called victim's mentality. To be a perpetual victim is to believe that circumstances alone shape your life. A person with a victim mentality is always talking about how their place in life is entirely placed upon them; every thing that happens is someone else's fault. We live in a generation of victim-minded whiners: its my parents fault, its the economies fault; its the governments fault. The problem with this way of thinking is that it prevents you from actually taken responsibility for your actions. It leads to a place where you are depressed and angry and push people away, with this false humility, 'you don't want to be around me anyway,' sort of attitude. You may make new friends, but eventually you will split from them to, but it will be their fault. And you will continue to suffer for the rest of your life, but it is because you have chosen to. The world is not against you, get over yourself, the world has more important things to worry about.

As one of God's chosen people, Naomi here even decides to play victim in relation to God: *the hand of the Lord has gone out against me*. Once again, Naomi is only holding to half of the story. God is in control, he is in control enough to make my life a living hell, but God is not good. Naomi has allowed her difficult decision to both define who she is and who God is. She has allowed the situation to dictate her reality.

### **Get better**

Orpah takes the reasonable out clause; when given the opportunity to remove herself from suffering she takes it. She is going to make the logical choice, go back home, pretend none of this ever happened, START OVER.

In many ways. Orpah's response was similar to the original choice of Elimelech when he found himself in the midst of famine. Find a reasonable solution to the problem. Choose to view suffering as nothing more than an inconvenience to be overcome. Work to get yourself out of it.

There is nothing wrong with not wanting to suffer, but if we reduce suffering and pain as something merely to conquer, we will spend all of our energy trying to get beyond it, instead of allowing it to shape us. We take what God is using for sanctification and we attempt to control it for the sake of temporary relief. The Christian life is not about avoiding suffering, but being able to face it humbly and worship God in it when it comes.

### **Get humble**

Ruth clung to Naomi. What would cause her to react this way? Naomi does not sound like a pleasant person to be around. There isn't a great outlook for staying with Naomi, as she has made abundantly clear. Why would Ruth choose this and why should we view this as the faithful choice?

#### **1. Ruth trusted the God of Naomi**

Ruth had a new heart. It is not that this decision brought Ruth into the good graces of God, maybe if I sidle up next to one of God's chosen people I can sneak in. She had already been made His, and now she was acting out of that reality. How do we know this? Her belief in God is made evident in the statement: *May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.* In this she references God as LORD and her belief that He had the power and authority to punish her if she breaks her promise.

#### **2. Ruth saw hope in the most difficult of situations.**

Ruth had just lost her husband, which would have put her in a very difficult situation. But she didn't allow the frustration to overwhelm her with fear and worry. She looked at the one thing that she had, Naomi, and saw in her a blessing from God. Those who have much often don't recognize what they have. Here it takes a foreigner, someone who had not grown up in the church and memorized all the right answers, to see the hope of an all-powerful/loving God in the midst of misery.

### 3. Ruth sacrificed her life to be a companion to Naomi

There was no initial benefit for Ruth to make this commitment. She promises herself to Naomi in the same way a husband and wife do to each other at marriage, til death do us part. This sort of sacrificial love for another person is not natural. Naomi doesn't have this kind of love. Orpah doesn't have this kind of love. Ruth's heart understands that grace demands a response. You can't be a recipient of the great gift of salvation and then sit on it.

#### DON'T WASTE YOUR SUFFERING

So when suffering comes to us, it is not an angry God smiting us, it is not an annoyance to somehow push aside so that we can get back to being blissfully unaware of how blessed we are, it is an opportunity to worship God. We cannot control our situations, but we are responsible for how we respond to the challenges in our life, and the ultimate purpose for ALL suffering is to move us from our self-centered place of self-dependence and self-loathing to be able to see outside of ourselves: see that God is at work and see that others are suffering as well. Bad things will happen to everyone. Death will come for each of us. This life is not about passing through unscarred, but making the most of every opportunity, even the ones we have no desire to be in.

The Apostle Paul addresses this in his second letter to the Corinthian church. Speaking about his thorn in the flesh, some difficulty that God placed in his life, he says:

*Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12.8-10*

This is not Paul trying to make himself sound good; giving the right answer because he knows he is supposed to accept the Scriptural ideal that Christians should suffer well. Paul loves that thorn, the very one that he asked be removed three times, because God made it clear that it was through that thorn that Paul was being humbled and God's glory was being made more majestic.

Apostle Peter says the same thing:

*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1.3-5*

The reason why Ruth, Paul and Peter can react to suffering with such confidence and seeming disregard for personal happiness, is because they gave up on this life already. They traded their best life now for a much better life in the future. Giving your life over to Jesus reorients your focus to eternity. The worst that this life has to offer can only be temporary. But we are being shaped for forever; this lifetime is God preparing us for eternity with Him. *Eternity puts our present situations into proper perspective.*

So when you come fact to face with trials in this life, and you all will:

**Don't get bitter.**

Bitterness is the result of a heart that cannot see blessings. Bitterness will paralyze you.

**Don't look for a better spot.**

The answer to your suffering is not a better situation. You will avoid a great deal of what God has called us to if we attempt to avoid difficulty.

**Get humble.**

To totally rip off John Piper, Don't Waste Your Suffering.

**1. Use your suffering to strengthen your trust in God.**

When you are helpless and don't know where else to turn, turn to Him. He is love, He promises to receive all who turn to Him. Christian or not. Whoever you are, whatever you have done, put your trust in Him. Recognize that in a world that promises nothing but uncertainty, He never changes. If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ you will be saved.

**2. Use your suffering as a means of understanding grace.**

Being able to suffer well is a gift of grace. We CAN find joy in our suffering because we know that the same God who secured salvation for us, uses the difficulties in our life to shape us into new creations:

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces*

*hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Romans 5.1-5*

### **3. Use your suffering as a means to sacrifice your life.**

Ruth's reaction to her difficult situation was to view her old life as over, allowing her to use her life to serve someone else. She clung to Naomi, not so much because Naomi was all she had, but because she was all Naomi had. Naomi sat lamenting how difficult her life was and how bitter her situation: ***I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.*** Seemingly forgetting that they had originally left because they were hungry. Ruth stands by with a quiet hope. Ruth comforted Naomi because she had already received her comfort from God:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 2*

### **Corinthians 1.3-5**

What we will see as we move forward in Ruth, is that through Ruth, God will reverse this statement of Naomi, taking her from famine to fullness. Bringing her from bitterness back to her original name: Naomi, which means pleasant. But none of it would have happened if this young girl had not trusted in God, clung to her mother-in-law, and sacrificed her life for the hope that came from seeing the grace and glory of God. I want to be careful here, there is nothing amazingly special about Ruth...believing that would make it easy for us to say: Ruth is wonderful, and then distance this from ourselves. Ruth is just a pagan, Moabite woman. Her strength comes from the hope that is given to her by God. That brings it home a bit, because WE HAVE THE SAME HOPE. We have been sealed by God for eternity, not because we are great, but because He is. We were His enemies and He reconciled us back to Himself as children. Never forget that. Never let that become second hat. Never let that become something that you store away on the shelf for Sundays. THIS STRENGTH HAS BEEN GIVEN TO YOU TO USE. The fact that Jesus Christ suffered for us, allows us to give up our life to sacrifice it for others. Not because we have to. Not because it will earn us God's favor. But because we have already been given EVERYTHING in the gift of Jesus Christ, and that stirs us on to good works that the change from enemy of God to servant of Him will be a witness of His work in our lives. Look for every opportunity, in suffering, in blessing, to manifest the love of God that has been given abundantly to you.