

## Enduring Love Ruth 1

How many of you enjoy a good love story? You will find many great love stories in history and literature. Antony and Cleopatra, Napoleon and Josephine, Romeo and Juliet, and of course Ricky and Lucy. However, some of the greatest love stories of all time are recorded in the Word of God. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Mary and Joseph are all great love stories. The book of Ruth is a love story. It's the story of Ruth's enduring love for her mother-in-law Naomi. It's the story of Boaz's redeeming love for Ruth. Above all it's the story of God's everlasting love for sinners like you and me and the price He paid for our salvation.

Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible named for a woman. The other is the book of Esther. Think about the contrast between those two books. Esther tells the story of a Jewish woman who married a Gentile man. Ruth tells us about a Gentile woman who marries a Jewish man. The book of Esther begins with a feast and it ends with a funeral. The book of Ruth begins with a funeral and it ends with a feast.

Verse 1 tells us that the events described in the book of Ruth took place *"in the days when the judges ruled."* The period when the Judges ruled was one of the darkest times in the history of the nation Israel. It was a time of unashamed idolatry and unrestrained immorality. It was a time of political anarchy, spiritual apostasy, and personal apathy.

The last verse of the last chapter of the book of Judges describes this period in Israel's history so well. Judges 21:25 says it was a time when *"Every man did that which was right in his own eyes."* Sounds a lot like our time, doesn't it? In the days of the Judges truth was whatever the individual wanted it to be. They were post-modern before there was post-modernism was cool. It was during this period of compromise, corruption, and confusion, this wonderful love story takes place.

Notice, the story of Ruth begins in *"Bethlehem, Judah."* The meaning of the name Bethlehem, Judah is interesting. Bethlehem means "house of bread," and Judah means "praise." Wouldn't you like to live in the house of bread and praise? The story of Ruth begins and ends there. Of course it is also the place where the Lord Jesus was born.

The book of Ruth begins with...

### 1. A Difficult Situation

Verse 1 says, *"There was a famine in the land."* In Bethlehem, "the house of bread," there was a shortage of bread. There are numerous famines mentioned in the Bible. Interestingly, every time a famine is mentioned it's a judgment from God. God had promised to bless the Israelites if they obeyed Him, but He warned them that if they turned to idols He would shut the heavens so that it would not rain and the ground would yield no grain (Deut. 11:16-17). The famine in the land of Bethlehem, Judah was the Lord's judgment on the Israelites for their idolatry and immorality during the time of the Judges.

Verse 1 goes on to tell us that because of the famine “*a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion--Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah*” (Ruth 1:1b-2).

Now let's take a closer look at this family. The husband and father in this family was a man named Elimelech, which means "God is my king." What a wonderful name to have. Unfortunately Elimelech doesn't live as if God is his King, as we are going to see. His wife's name is Naomi, which means "pleasant." Elimelech and Naomi had two boys. One of them was named Mahlon and the other was named Chilion (KIL ih ahn). Mahlon means "puny." Chilion means "pining." They were two sickly boys.

Because of the famine Elimelech makes...

## 2. A Fateful Decision

He decides to take his wife “pleasant,” and his two boys “puny” and “pining” down to Moab. The land of Moab was east of Bethlehem across the Jordan River Valley on the other side of the Dead Sea in what is modern day Jordan. The Moabites were the descendants of Lot's son Moab who was born out of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his oldest daughter (Gen. 19:37). The Moabites were an outcast people and the frequent enemies of the Israelites. In Psalms 60:8 and 108:9 God says, "*Moab is my wash pot.*" Literally, He's saying that Moab is “My garbage can.”

Elimelech decides to leave "the house of bread," and go down to the garbage can. Why? There was a famine in the land and he was looking for a way to feed his family. He made a reasonable decision, but it was a faithless decision. Like many of us, Elimelech lived by sight instead of faith. Instead of trusting the Lord to provide for his family he decided to take matters into his own hands. Instead of bringing his problems to the Lord in prayer he tried running away from them. Instead of turning to God he chose to travel down to Moab.

If you had talked to Elimelech before he left Bethlehem, he would have probably said to you, "Look, faith is fine. I believe in God, but we are dealing with a real problem here. There is a famine in Bethlehem and there is food in Moab. Anyway, everybody is doing it. Everybody is getting out of Dodge and going to Moab." The truth of the matter is that everybody wasn't doing it. There was a man named Boaz who trusted the Lord. He didn't run away to Moab and God blessed him for his faith, as we are going to see.

Notice, it says at the end of verse 2, “*And they went to the country of Moab and remained there.*” How long did they stay? Probably a lot longer than they intended to when they left Judah. Verse 4 tells us “*And they dwelt there about ten years.*”

There is an important spiritual lesson there. As someone once said, "Sin will take you further than you want to go, teach you more than you want to know, cost you more than you want to pay, and keep you longer than you want to stay. Always!"

Next we see...

### **3. A Tragic Occasion**

Elimelech made a mistake taking his family to Moab. They went down to Moab looking for food. Instead, they found funerals. In fact, there were three funerals.

Look at verse 3. *“Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband”* (Ruth 1:3-5).

What a sad scene. Here is Naomi standing before a grave, grieving the death of her husband. Many of you here this morning know what that is like. You know the heartbreak of burying your mate. But Naomi's suffering wasn't over. Not long after standing at the graveside of Elimelech she finds herself grieving over the death of her two sons.

Beloved, our choices have consequences. Elimelech and his family found misery in Moab. Listen folks, you will always find your misery down in Moab. Everything you really need you will find in the house of the Father. Just ask the Prodigal Son. You will find nothing but heartache when you get away from God and go down to Moab.

There were two other widows standing with Naomi at the graveside of her sons; her daughter-in-laws. One of the women was named Orpah. Not Oprah, but Orpah. The other daughter-in-law was named Ruth. I am absolutely certain that this poor, broken hearted Moabite woman named Ruth never imagined that the painful circumstances she was experiencing were a part of God's providential plan for her life. All of those experiences were like links in a golden chain that would ultimately lead to her redemption.

The first link was a famine. I don't know how much Ruth knew about the famine in Bethlehem, but that famine was a link in the chain God used to draw Ruth to Himself.

Another link in the chain was a family. The sovereign Lord led Ruth to meet a Jewish family from Judah who believed in the one true God. She married into a family of believers. Their faith wasn't all that it should have been but the Lord used them to be a testimony to Ruth.

A third link was a funeral. Who would have ever thought that God would use a funeral to bring someone to faith? Illus. – “My father's death and my brother's salvation.”

The Lord used a famine, a family, and a funeral to bring Ruth to faith. God arranges the circumstances in your life and mine, both the pleasant and the painful, to bring us to Himself.

Finally we see...

### **4. A Loving Declaration**

The scene changes now. Verse 6 says, *"Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people by giving them bread. Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah"* (Ruth 1:6-7).

After hearing the good news that God once again blessed her homeland with rain and her people with bread Naomi makes a decision. She decides to go back to Bethlehem. Somewhere along the way back to Bethlehem Naomi has a real heart to heart with Orpah and Ruth. Look at verse 8. *"And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. 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 in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept."* They have a real crying jag. *"And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go--for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!"* (Ruth 1:8-13).

Naomi's heart was in the right place when she told her daughters-in-law to go back home to Moab. I'm sure she believed she was giving Ruth and Orpah good advice, but think about what she was sending them back to? She was encouraging these two young women to return to a world of idolatry, pagan darkness, and spiritual death.

Notice what it says in verse 14, *"Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her."* Orpah took Naomi's advice and went back to her people, but Ruth refused to leave. There stands Naomi with tears in her eyes and an ache in her heart watching Orpah walk away, knowing she will never see her daughter-in-law again. I tell you, it was a very sad scene.

That brings us to one of the most beautiful and familiar passages in the Bible. Look at verse 15. Naomi says to Ruth, *"Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever 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. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me"* (Ruth 1:15-17).

What a beautiful declaration of love and faith. Ruth made a life time commitment to her mother-in-law and to God. She said to Naomi "I'm going to go where you go. I'm never going to leave you. I'm going to place my faith in God and follow Him."

Dear friends that is love. Love, faith, and commitment always go together. Let me close with a few thoughts about commitment. First of all let me remind you that marriage is a commitment.

When a man and a woman stand before family and friends to exchange their wedding vows they are making a commitment to love each other, for better or worse, as long as they both shall live. Marriage is meant to be a life-long covenant between the bride, the groom, and God.

Second, every Christian needs to understand that being a member of the church is a commitment. When you join a church you are making a commitment to God and to God's family. I must confess that I am very discouraged with all of the church hopping that is so prevalent today. Beloved, don't join this church or any other until you are sure it's where God wants you to be, but when you make the decision to join for heaven's sake stick with it. Get to know your church family, get involved in ministry, and get along with your brothers and sisters.

Finally, it's needs to be said that Christianity is a commitment. Becoming a Christian means committing your life to Christ today, tomorrow, next week, next year, and forever. It means following Jesus no matter the cost.