

## Ruth 1

1. *In the days when the Judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. 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.*

2. *The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.*

3. *Now, Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died and she was left with her two sons.*

4. *They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years,*

5. *both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.*

6. *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.*

7. *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.*

8. *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.*

9. *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*

10. *and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."*

11. *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 husband?"*

12. *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 -*

13. *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!"*

14. *At this, they wept aloud. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.*

15. *"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."*

16. *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.*

17. *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."*

18. *When Naomi realised that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.*

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?"*

20. *"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.*

21. *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."*

22. *So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.*

What a story! This is a story for those who wonder where God is in their life. This is a story for those who wonder how God can allow terrible thing after terrible thing to happen. This is a story for those who wonder how God can use their ordinary life for good. This is a story for those who wonder how hardships can become fresh new hope. But overall this is a story to encourage you and to refresh you.

Let's go back to verse 1.

We start off this story with the words “In the days when the Judges ruled.”

Let’s stop there for a moment...

The time of the Judges was a time after Israel had entered the promised land under command of Joshua, but a time before there were any Kings. If we look back one verse we can understand a little better what this time may have been like. Judges 21:25 says “In those days Israel had no King; every one did as they saw fit”.

This was a dark and miserable time in Israel. People would sin, God would send enemies against them, the people would cry out to God, God would raise up a Judge to deliver them from their enemies. Again and again this cycle went on. But what we will see in the story of Ruth is God’s hidden work during this terrible time.

Let’s continue reading...

Verses 1-5 is filled with misery and hardship for Naomi and her family.

Firstly, there was a famine in the land of Judah, which forced Naomi, her husband and two sons to leave their home and seek refuge in a place in a foreign land.

There could be many reasons for this famine; drought, disease, locust invasion, loss of livestock or even from warfare.

*But do you know what Naomi and her family would have thought about this famine?*

Leviticus 26:3-4 says “*If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees fruit.*”

They would have thought that God was judging them and forcing this famine on them! We don’t actually get told what the cause of this famine is, but what we do know is that this famine is referencing Genesis 12:10 where Abram went to Egypt to avoid the famine and also it is referencing Genesis 26:1 where Isaac was faced with a famine.

This reference to Abram and Isaac, where God provided and blessed them, it makes us wonder if this was God’s intention in Ruth.

Secondly, they went to reside in the town of Moab. This was a pagan land, with pagan Gods. Being foreigners in a land during that time would have been hard, they were protected legally, but they would be living in poverty and as social outcasts.

Thirdly, Elimelek, Naomi's husband dies! How terrible would it be to be living in a time of war and judgement only to be faced with a famine, being exiled to a foreign land and then your husband dies! Surely Naomi must be thinking that, God must not like them very much and they must have done something horrible!

But there is hope yet! Naomi still has her two sons. What a celebration it must have been for Naomi to see her children marry! Even if it was to Moabite women. But once again, tragedy and hardship follows. After 10 years, and still no grandchildren for Naomi, both of her sons die!

Terrible time to live, a famine (most likely brought on by the judgement of God), exiled to live as aliens in a foreign land, death of her husband, marriage of sons to foreign wives, the death of both her sons.

Blow after blow, tragedy after tragedy, hardship after hardship! Surely this would be the lowest hardest point in anyone's life.

Naomi is now a widow, childless, without any grandchildren and she also has her two widows daughters-in-law to think about!

Let's carry on reading...

Verses 6 and 7 outlines some good news (finally) that the Lord has come to the aid of his people and there is food once again in the land of Judah! Naomi had lived a long life both in Judah and in Moab. She was probably past childbearing age and so there was no hope for her to find a husband or even for her to have any more children of her own.

When I was reading these verses, I wondered why did they set out and only once they were along the way did Naomi tell her daughters-in-law to return home? Well, one possible explanation is that she knew that they would try and stop her from leaving, and she knew that if she was in the place she had called home for many years, then she could be swayed to stay. So instead, Naomi set out with her belongings along the path away from Moab so that no one could convince her to stay in Moab.

Verses 8-13 is simply Naomi trying to convince her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and live a long happy life with a new husband. They were after all still able to have children and they would be protected and cared for in Moab. Which wouldn't be the case in Judah. If they followed Naomi to Judah then they would be aliens in the land. Not a good or safe place for a lone female.

In Verse 9 we can see that Naomi also understood that it was not safe for Orpah and Ruth to go to Judah with her. The phrase “May God show you kindness” is Naomi’s way of trying to force Orpah and Ruth to stay in Moab. Now, when I read this, I was thinking that this phrase was similar to how we may say “Goodbye, and God bless you”. But that’s not the case! It was more like saying “See ya later, have a good life.” It was a cutting of ties. Naomi was essentially separating herself from them.

And yet despite this in verse 10 we read that Orpah and Ruth still wanted to go back to Judah with Naomi.

Naomi responds to this in verses 11 - 13. She basically scoffs at them! She is saying How stupid of you! You are being illogical! Go back home you silly women!

So what did Orpah and Ruth do?

Verses 14 - 18 outlines their responses.

Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye, but Ruth clings to her! What different responses those two women had!

Now Orpah did everything right, she listened and she obeyed. This was devotion to Naomi.

But Ruth listened and she responded no. This was also devotion to Naomi.

Now out of these two, Orpah had the best response.

Naomi had painted an image to both of these women what life would look like if they followed her to Judah. Life would be bleak, it would be terrible, if they followed her they were doomed to a hopeless future. But Ruth decided that she would show her devotion to Naomi despite the hard life that lay ahead and Ruth decided that she would walk hand in hand with Naomi back to the land of Judah.

What I find truly amazing about Ruth’s devotion is in verse 6 where she says to Naomi, “Your God will be my God.” But Naomi had a bitter experience of God. Despite this bitterness and hardships that Ruth had seen, she still made a commitment to forsake her religious heritage and make the God of Israel her God.

If we continue reading in verses 19 - 21 we read about Naomi and Ruth arriving in Judah and the town stirred with excitement at Naomi’s return. Now this type of

excitement to take over a town was not normal. Many people would be walking through the town every day and no one would bat an eye. But for some reason, they recognised Naomi and the town was excited to see her.

But Naomi responds to their excitement not with excitement but with her talking about her bitterness and hardship that she has undertaken. She tells people to stop calling her Naomi, which means pleasant and instead to call her Mara, which means bitterness.

And finally in verse 22 we see that Naomi and Ruth had indeed returned to Judah right as the barley harvest was beginning.

When I was reading this, I was struck by the incredible hardship that Naomi had to suffer through, famine, exile, death of her husband, death of both of her children, no grandchildren. Naomi had a hard life. I can't even imagine having to go through all that.

But when I was reading this I was also struck by how much good and hope there was that Naomi didn't seem to notice at all! The good news we read about in verse 6 for example where God provided an end to the famine in the land! Or the devotion and loyalty that Ruth showed to Naomi to journey alongside her, not only to Judah but for the rest of their lives! What a blessing Ruth was to Naomi! The safe passage from Moab to Judah! Naomi arrived safely! How amazing that must have been to arrive back in your homeland! And even the excitement of the town when they saw Naomi! They were excited and happy to see her, and all she could see is her bitterness.

How often are we like Naomi? Woe is me. How often do we get bogged down with the things that are happening now? How often do we find ourselves reflecting and looking at the bad things that are happening to us now! Or the hardships that have happened in the past? How often do we push others away because 'we are strong and can do it ourselves'?

Now, I am not saying that we should ignore hardships completely, no! I believe we can learn from Naomi in this. She was honest. She said she was suffering, and rightly so!

But what we also need to take away from this story, is that it is during that hard times that we become blind to the goodness and hope around us.

Just as Naomi had Ruth to walk alongside her, we too need those people to walk alongside us. We need to encourage one another, we need to point out the good, we need to point towards hope, but more than that we need to be honest with others, we need to be able to say “yes life is hard, but God is good and He loves me.

Jesus commands us to love one another. This doesn't mean to only love one another when life is good, no! This means to love one another at all times. During the hard times and the good times.

So church, be honest. Don't hide the things that are going on in your life.

Be hopeful, that God loves you immeasurably and infinitely and he wants good for you.

Be unified, together as one. As a group of people that love and care about each other deeply.

And finally, continue to pray with and for one another.