

-College students at Spring Break - about 80. The last time we did this was in 2020.

Ruth 1

If you remember from last week with Joseph, we talked about what happens when painful circumstances hit your life or when life doesn't turn out the way you want. Today with this new series, we're going to dive into that more. What happens when life is less than ideal? What happens when you're under pressure - what do you do? What happens when, no matter your age or season of life, you look at all that's happened to you, and life didn't turn out how you wanted it to?

Now what's interesting is, that the Bible gives us these answers but not in the ways we expect.

- The Bible primarily answers those questions through stories - narratives. And the answers are not always as overt as we want them to be. For us modern folks reading these stories that are thousands of years old, the answers they give us are not as clean-cut as we want them to be.
 - But come to think of it - all good stories do this. All good stories implicitly teach us something.
 - Being content where you are... *It's a Wonderful Life*
 - Kids. Overcoming loss and the importance of connection... *Up*
 - If you wanna know about the power of family... I could tell you family is important and cite stats and articles. Or I could tell you the story of a group of street racers in southern California led by Dom Toretto in the *Fast and the Furious* franchise
 - What I'm saying is stories have the power to move us and shape us far better than mere facts, and the Bible knows that.
- On top of that, what we're going to see is in this story of Ruth, the hero of the book is not who we expect. Back then, in ancient Near Eastern stories, the heroes were generally men with power or prestige or came from some well-known, well-respected background to make it clear to the reader, "This is the type of person you should listen to"
 - But as we're going to see, the book of Ruth subverts this. The book of Ruth centers on this female character... which was uncommon in the day. This unlikely hero. With no power or prestige of her own... which was strange. On top of that, she's a foreigner from a minority that most Jewish people hated at the time. She's an outsider. In Hebrew - *goy*, or later called a Gentile. And yet here she is in the Bible.
 - In fact, Ruth is the only OT book named after a non-Jewish character.
 - And yet, the book is celebrated because it speaks so well to the human condition, of how to respond in the face of adversity. As a result, the Jewish people, for over thousands of years, STILL read this story at loud every year during one of their major festivals, called Shavuot/Pentecost, to commemorate her story and how God provides.

Ruth 1:1-2

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. 2 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.

Alright, so let's set the stage a little bit..

Part of reading whole books of the bible - you gotta ask yourself some initial questions to get you situated. Ask "who/what/where/when/why." we get all of that in the setup vv.1-2

WHEN is this happening? Look at v.1 - "In the days when the judges ruled," this references the book of Judges. So that's when this story takes place. Judges takes place soon after the writing of the Torah - sometime around 1200(ish) BC - God's people leave Sinai and eventually settle into Canaan, the promised land, that's where you get the book of Joshua. But it quickly becomes anarchy. It's not like, "Then they get to the land God promised to Abraham in Genesis 12, and yay they live happily ever after! Nope. It's chaos! Refrain "Everyone did what was right in their own eyes." As soon as God brings them to the place he promised them, they quickly forget and descend into idolatry. And it happens over and over again.

WHAT is happening? Again look at v.1 - **Famine in the land** - which God said would happen in the Torah in **Deuteronomy 28** if/when his people turn to other idols. If people turn their backs on him, out of love, God wants to show them how things will go bad for them when that happens. So as a result, the crops aren't coming in. People are starving. Back then this was maybe one of the top 3 worst things that could happen to you and your nation. This was on the same level as a nation conquering you in war. Or you being exiled from the land. Famine was a big deal. **So imagine with me, this story opens up as this barren, dystopian wasteland of a place. Like the Last of Us or Mad Max or something.**

WHERE is this happening? Back again, v.1 in the town of Bethlehem. This is a small town among the nation of Israel. Now what's wild is Bethlehem comes from two words in Hebrew - *Beth* meaning house. And *lehem* means bread. So literally, Bethlehem means House of Bread. And...there's a famine. So there's no food anywhere, not even at the House of Bread. **It's like if you go to IHOP and you order pancakes and they're like, "Yeah we're out of pancakes." It's like dude, that's your whole deal. It's like going to Taco Bell and they have no Tacos. Waffle House with no waffles. You get it. The point is, the setting is meant to show us some irony here. It's ironic. A little too ironic.**

WHO are the characters? A family. Husband, Elimelech. Wife, Naomi. Two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. They travel to Moab in search of a better life. **(Show a map)**

Now some quick background Moab was looked down upon by the people of Israel. Outsiders. Pagans. Backwards. Hated minority group. If you want to read more about why Jewish people hated Moabites, there's a weird story in the Torah - **Genesis 19**. I'd encourage you to read that in your own time. But the point is here's this Israelite family, leaving Israel in search of food.

Ruth 1:3-4

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

So we see some conflict arising. Elimelech dies. The patriarch of the family who we were introduced to one verse ago, gone. **Ned Stark in Game of Thrones.** And on top of that, new characters are introduced - Elimelech's sons take two foreign wives. Orpah and Ruth. Even though one family member died, perhaps they can still grow their family while in Moab. But then the unthinkable happens....

Ruth 1:5

...and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Everyone but the women die, and on top of that, there are no kids. Why's that a big deal? Back then, if you wanted to ensure you were protected and provided for, the primary way that happened was through your family - particularly your husband, your sons, and your grandsons. The larger your family, the more extensive your network of relationships became, so you were safe and provided for.

But while in Moab, it all goes sideways. What was meant to be this opportunity for a better life for their family, all goes wrong. And now Naomi has no husband, no sons, no grandsons. She's a widow with nothing to call her own. So what's she going to do?

Orpah and Ruth are also left without their husbands to provide for them. So these three women, now widows, are in this place of deep vulnerability.

Ruth 1:6

Then she (meaning Naomi) 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 think about it like this. Back then, if you wanted to make sure you were provided for, you had a few options -

1 - You could **go work** in the fields. Do some hard labor daily to earn your keep, but Naomi is too old for that. So that's not an option.

2 - If she wanted to make sure she was taken care of, she could get **remarry**. Because back then, family was everything - that's why you generally got married in those days - to have a family, because, like I said, your family, particularly a husband, your sons, could take care of you. But she's too old to have kids - so remarriage is not an option either.

3 - **Your children**, particularly sons, could support you, but her sons are dead.

4 - She could return home and **rent her family's land out...** but she has to sell her land to make ends meet. (That comes back later in the story.)

All this to say - Naomi is straight out of options. She has nothing. And in the midst of this, she hears this faint whisper of hope that the famine is over in Israel. So what does she do?

Ruth 1:7-9

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. **8** 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. **9** 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.

In other words, Naomi, on her pilgrimage back to Israel, still has her daughters-in-law who are widows too, and they're in the same boat as Naomi. The people who were meant to provide for them and protect them are dead. But Naomi essentially shoos them away and tells them to stop following her. The reason is, that Orpah and Ruth have families they can return to. They're still young enough, they could go work. They're still young enough, they could remarry and have children back in their homeland, and they will be provided for, where they will not be a hated minority group. Everything about the situation reveals that it makes more sense for them to return home.

Ruth 1:10-13

And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." **11** 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? **12** 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, **13** 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."

Do you hear the logic of Naomi? Do you feel the anger and grief in her words? Naomi's logic makes a lot of sense. "If you're looking for someone to take care of you, I can't do that, so go back to your family where you'll be taken care of. There's nothing I can give you." She's saying, "My life is over, but you still have a chance. It doesn't have to be the end of the road for either of you. Go back to your family. Start a family of your own while you still have a chance."

Ruth 1:14

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Orpah listens to Naomi's advice and goes back home to Moab. Which again, makes complete sense to do. But Ruth stayed... v.14 says Ruth "clung to her." The Hebrew word for clung is *davak*. **It means stuck or attached.... It's often used in the Bible to describe marriage covenant relationships.** Which, if you're reading this text for the first time, is a weird thing to do if you're Ruth.

I mean, think about it. Orpah leaves Naomi so that she can move on from this terrible chapter in her life and start fresh. Ruth doesn't. She clings to Naomi even though Naomi has no options. And Naomi notices this is weird too, keep reading:

Ruth 1:15

And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

Naomi's like, "See what your sister-in-law did? Go do that. Look, she's not that far away. You can still catch up with her. Get out of here." **Air Bud scene?** And then I love this - I imagine Ruth basically interrupting Naomi and telling her to shush. Check it out:

Ruth 1:16-17

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. 17 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.”

At this moment, Ruth says something entirely out of left field. “Go find a better life somewhere else.” But Ruth stays. She’s clung to her. She sort of covenantally commits herself to her. She says, “Hey, cut it out. Stop talking. I’m going where you’re going. For richer or poorer. Til death do us part.”

She chooses to cling to Naomi EVEN THOUGH Naomi has nothing to offer. On top of that, what do you think will happen when a foreigner like Ruth, from a land despised by Israelites, enters Israel? It’s very likely she will be hated and looked down upon. A vulnerable young woman - in the time of the judges with no one to protect her. I mean, it’s not hard to imagine what could happen to her. Yet, nevertheless, she chooses to go with Naomi and to be an immigrant in the land.

See, most people immigrate because of hope for a better life, even with all the uncertainty and unknown. But in Ruth’s case, she’s going somewhere where her life could very well be noticeably worse.

Now the big question is here we have to ask is... **why?** Why would Ruth go against conventional wisdom and stay with Naomi, who has nothing to offer? Why would Ruth go somewhere where her life will likely be worse? Well, there’s a clue in that passage I just read, but before we get to that, let’s keep reading.

Ruth 1:18-19

And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. Naomi realizes she can’t talk Ruth out of it so she’s like “Eh, alright.” 19 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?”

So these two women arrive in Bethlehem and instantly become the talk of the town. Bethlehem is a small place. Everybody knows everybody. “Is this Naomi?!” And this is conjecture, but I can just imagine the whispers, “Oh my word, what happened to her?! Bless her heart.” Naomi is hearing all the gossip and whispers and says this:

Ruth 1:20-21

She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 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?”

As we’ve said before, names mean something in the Bible. The name Naomi means pleasant, but as she’s talking with everyone, she’s saying, “Look, there’s nothing pleasant about my life. So call me Mara, which means bitter... because, she says, God has dealt bitterly with me.

Ruth 1:22

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.

And that’s it. Chapter one. This is the backdrop for the rest of the story... an old, cynical widow and her foreign daughter-in-law are out of options... and arrive in the small town of Bethlehem... and the question that will permeate throughout the rest of the book is what is going to happen to them? What will come of their problem?

Now as we step back from the text, I want us to look back at it again. You may not have noticed this, you may have, but everyone in chapter 1 of this story is all reacting and responding to the same set of circumstances.

Here’s what I mean - in **v.1** there was a famine. Massive devastation. You don’t know when the next meal will come. You’re in survival mode. And we are told of three different responses. Three ways to respond when life upends you and doesn’t turn out the way you wanted it to.

1 - Elimelech

What does he do? Well, he responds to the situation - the famine - by moving his family out of Israel into a foreign land. Which, at first glance, makes sense to me as someone with a family of my own. "Food's not coming here, well then we better move somewhere else." Like, if you're out of a job and a job opens up in another town, as a dad, it would make a lot of sense, we gotta move our family to get provided for. That soooooounds like that's what's going on.

But there's more going on. Like I said, in **Deuteronomy 28**, God said a famine would happen if Israel was unfaithful. And yet, Elimelech, as an Israelite knowing this, would have also known that just a couple chapters over in **Deuteronomy 30**, that when God did that, it was meant to be a sign for God's people to turn back to God. To repent of their sins. To forsake their idols and to cling to God alone. To ask for forgiveness, and if and when God's people did that, God would heal the land - and the harvest would come. The famine was an opportunity for repentance.

But notice, Elimelech doesn't do that. Rather than repent and stay in the land God provided for Israel, and ask for forgiveness, he takes matters into his own hands. He tries to fix things on his own. He compromises what he knows to be true about God - and instead goes his own way.

Elimelech, in the face of suffering, chooses the path of unrighteous decision-making. He chooses to take matters into his own hands and compromises. And in the same way, we can easily be tempted with that too. When life is less than ideal. When our circumstances are not what we want them to be, rather than stop and examine ourselves and take it to God, we can easily go the path of compromise. To take matters into our own hands - to do whatever we can to fix the immediate situation at hand rather than first taking it to God.

Obviously, this can come out in all kinds of ways in life... but the short of it is: You can say you trust God, but when the heat gets turned up in your life, you will do what you think is best...

- To take the path of compromise and say, "Look, I know life is busy and hectic and chaotic, so... **I know I should be in biblical community**, but I don't have time. Let me look out for myself and my family first."
 - Or the path of compromise could say, "Look, I am in a biblical community, but again life is busy and stressful, so I want to do the bare minimum while I'm there just so people can get off my back, but I'm still calling the shots here."
- **Generosity and hospitality**
- To take the path of compromise and say, "I know life is tough right now. I'm under so much pressure at school, at work, with my family, with life in general. So **I don't have all this margin to take that to God in Scripture and prayer**, and quite honestly, I don't want to even though I know I should. Maybe if and when life lets up, I can think about taking this stuff to God but not when my life is like this."
- To take the path of compromise and say, "Look, life is the same day-in and day-out. It's hard enough, and I need a break. **So what's the big deal if the main way I get rest and relief is if I catch up on my shows? Or scroll on my phone? Or shop online? I know I should get to the Jesus stuff eventually, but right now, this is working for me.**"
 - And like Elimelech, the way of compromise can make so much sense on the outside. Disclaimer: I'm all for hustling and fixing problems. You have agency. Yes and...when you fail to take it to God or community first, we often default to "what is right in our own eyes." The path of compromise, of taking matters into your own hands, when God is an afterthought or no thought at all, leads like Elimelech to decay, further brokenness and spiritual death.

In the face of suffering, Elimelech shows us option 1 - to respond with compromise and unrighteous decision-making.

2 - Naomi

What does she do? Well, she responds to the same initial situation as Elimelech did - the famine - by moving out of Israel and into Moab. And out of all that happens in this chapter, she responds in bitterness and despair. Did you see that in **vv.20-21**?

Ruth 1:20

She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

Notice how not only does she acknowledge the pain, but she identifies with her pain. Her pain is who she is. Don't call me Naomi (pleasant), call me Mara. Call me bitter. This is who I am now.

This is an intense reaction so much so she changes her name. Which, as far as I can tell, no one else in the Bible changes their own name. I did some research, I counted 13 characters in the Bible that have a name change but 12 of them are changed by someone else. Naomi is the only one who changes her own. Which tells you something about just how deeply she hurts. Check again **v.21**:

Ruth 1:21

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?"

Not only does she identify with her pain, but she also blames it all on God. "God, this is all your fault. You did this to me. You could have done something, but you didn't."

Naomi's life is so blinded by her pain to where, even when her daughter-in-law Ruth chooses to stick with her, Naomi can't see it. She doesn't notice how beautiful that is or how God might be at work in front of her. Instead, she seems to roll her eyes and move on, so stuck in her pain and her grief. She's self-absorbed. She can't see anything good. And on top of that, she tries to isolate herself in her pain rather than try to understand whatever it is Ruth is thinking by clinging to her.

Naomi chooses the path of bitterness. And just like Elimelech, we can easily fall into this narrative. Where Elimelech was, "Life did not turn out how I want I need to fix this apart from God." Naomi's narrative is, "Life did not turn out how I want, because God is against me."

If I may say the hard thing - some of you are letting your pain and your trauma identify you. "this is who I am. I can't move on because of this event in my life or because of this season that happened to me in my past. And some of us wouldn't say, call me "Mara,"... but we would say, "Call me my addiction, call me my depression, call me my parents were absent, call me my trauma or my mental health diagnosis."

Disclaimer: Now hear me, please - there is absolutely a time and a place for grieving and lamenting. There's a ton of Bible on the topic of expressing your frustration to God. Crying out to him in prayer when things don't go the way you want.

But there's a fine line between healthy processing and godly grief in community, to look beyond yourself to seek wisdom and help, and then there's looking primarily at yourself. Obsessing over your pain. For some of us, it leads easily to blaming and condemning God which leads to **self-absorption** and isolation.

The data is out - when you obsess over your pain - generally speaking, it doesn't lead to mental wholeness or wellness. Talking about your problems all the time, generally makes the problems grow. And when that happens, you become like Naomi - stuck in your grief.

Bitterness can manifest itself in a number of ways:

- "God, why did you let this happen to me in my past? All this talk about finding my joy in your sure feels like wishful thinking. I mean if you knew my life. If you knew what I've gone through. Pfft."
- "God, I tried to do the right thing - I tried to be a good student, a good friend, a good spouse, a good parent, but it didn't turn out how I wanted it to. Why?"
- "God, I'm trying my best. I really am. I know I'm not perfect, but I honestly try to faithfully follow you" - maybe you're a leader in our church and are feeling this - burnt out, exhausted, frustrated. "God, I wanted to do this because you wanted me to - and this is the thanks I get? Really? If you really loved me, things would have been different. My life would have turned out differently."

Like Naomi, we can become so entrenched in our bitterness at God that we begin to write a narrative about Him and miss what he's doing right in front of us. To not see the good happening around you. To be self-absorbed and isolated from others.

But then there's the third response...

3 - Ruth

What does she do? Well, she's a byproduct of the same initial situation - the famine - by marrying into the family. And out of all that happens in this chapter, notice how she responds.

Ruth 1:16-17

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. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried..."

She instead clings - she *davaks* - to Naomi. She makes this sort of covenantal vow to Naomi even though Naomi has nothing to offer.

We said this was weird for a couple of reasons. She basically chooses the harder option by sticking with Naomi. She is giving up her homeland, a more secure future, her family ties, and her former religion to go with Naomi of all people. At face value, this looks like a terrible gamble. Why? Like I said there's a clue buried within the text, specifically v.17, look at the second half of v.17:

Ruth 1:17

May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."

May who? The LORD. Now that's in all caps. Whenever you see LORD in all caps, it's pointing us to the Hebrew name of God underneath...what is it? Yahweh.

Like we've said so many times before in our last series, whenever the author of a passage or a character in the passage evokes the name Yahweh, there's something special going on. Only people in relationship with God were allowed to call him Yahweh.

So here you have this young widow. She's a foreigner, or as the Bible calls non-Jews, a Gentile, from a hated people group. Pagan background. And yet she seems to be in on something no other character in this chapter, not even the Israelite characters, are in on. The non-Israelite knows something about Yahweh that the others don't. And that's what enables her to say, "Look, Naomi. I'm not going anywhere..."

Biblical scholars cite this as one of the most explicit moments in the Old Testament we see of a "conversion experience." She gives up her homeland, her geography, her family ties, and her religion...and commits herself, clings herself to, God and his people.

You see, Ruth's epic speech in **vv.16-17** isn't really about her commitment to Naomi. It's about her commitment to Yahweh. To put it another way - Why does Ruth cling to Naomi? The reason is, she's able to pledge herself to Naomi is because she has pledged herself to God.

She is saying, "Naomi, the reason I belong to you is because I belong to God. I know we have suffered much. I know the future doesn't look too great for me in Bethlehem. I'll be rejected as a foreigner, I'll be ostracized as a widow. I'll be cast aside and cast out. But your God is now my God. I'm not going anywhere. I'm all in on Yahweh."

You see, Ruth gives us another narrative when life is not turning out the way we hoped.

- Whereas Elimelech says, "This happened, so I will take matters into my own hands apart from God"
- Whereas Naomi says, "This happened because God is against me."
- Ruth says, "Yes, this happened, but I will choose to be faithful."

And this narrative is available to us too. When life happens to us

- To say, "I will choose faithfulness even when life did not turn out the way I wanted because I know Yahweh."

- I will choose faithfulness even when I experience loss. Even when I experience heartache. Even when I'm day-in and day-out exhausted. Because I know God is near."
- To say, "I will choose faithfulness even when my life is filled with pain and suffering. Because I know God loves me - and I know what He can do - God can bring beauty out of the pain. And I know, **even though** I don't know all the details, that God is doing something here so long as I hang on and trust him."

And in the midst of all of this. We see at the end of chapter 1 a glimmer of hope. Even though God is not overtly in this book, we see him working behind the scenes of the story. Look back at v.22:

Ruth 1:22

And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Chapter 1 starts with a famine in the land - and ends with a harvest. We see, this spark of hope. God is still working. Their story is not over yet.

In all of this - God is faithful to His people. He has not abandoned them. He has not forgotten them. He has not and will not turn His back on them. He is still good, He is still working, He is still moving. The story isn't over yet.

And that means for you, wherever you are - whether your life is filled with its setbacks and challenges. Whether it's filled with pain and loss. Whether your life is filled with worry or unmet expectations or whatever it is...God is still good. God is still working. God is still moving. And that means your story isn't over yet, either.

Conclusion

And the good news is...this is just the beginning of the story. And this story of one family is but a micro-story of the larger story of how God deals with his Israel. This is a story that showcases God's covenant love. God's unwavering grace. God providing. Always on the move. Even when you can't see it. Even when God seems invisible to you.

And that invisible hand, that covenant love, that sheer act of grace we will find all culminates in the person of Jesus. Who, like Ruth, is the hero of the Story no one expected. If Ruth is the outsider in this small story, Jesus is the outsider in the bigger story. The one who, like Ruth, was despised and looked down upon - yet, with unwavering trust and faithfulness, does the thing no one expected by providing for us our greatest need by offering himself on a cross for our sin and conquering death so that we could be made alive. So that me and you, much like Ruth, Gentiles in our own right, could know the deep deep love of God.

Now we'll dive all the more into how this story connects to Jesus, and there's a lot - so come back next week.

For now, let me leave you with this...when it comes to the narratives in your life...

Will you be like Elimelech, trying to toil and work and take matters into our own hands? To try and write your own story? Will you be like Naomi blaming God, and isolating yourself from others? Or will you let Ruth's story, and ultimately Jesus' story, be your story? To trust God to do the work in you. Let God write and shape your story. To see that he is still providing. And that through Jesus, we know, as long as there's breath in your lungs, he still has more work to do in you.

Pray
Communion