

## ***A SURPRISING CONVERSION?***

### **Ruth 1**

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**“Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land.”** The opening words of the book of Ruth provide the setting for the entire book. The story takes place in the time of the Judges. The time the judges ruled God’s covenant people fell in the years 1250-1050 BC, the time between entering the Promised Land and the appointment of Saul as their first king. Borrowing from Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, these were both the best of times and the worst of times for the nation of Israel. God’s covenant with Israel had consequences attached. There was the promise of blessing when they were faithful, but the promise of judgment and cursing when they were unfaithful.

The book of Judges is summarized in Judges 17:6, “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6). The refrain is repeated in closing the book in 21:25. Therefore God in His mercy raised up judges for His people to guide them in the things of the Lord. We see a cycle that is repeated in Judges: sin, repentance, restoration, return to evil. As long as Israel had a judge, they sought the Lord and lived in peace. The moment a judge died, they would return to their evil ways. It is evidently during one of these “in-between” times that chapter 1 of Ruth takes place. **“There was a famine in the land”** indicates that the nation was in the midst of judgment for their unfaithfulness. God spelled out the curses for disobedience in Deut. 28:15ff, “But it shall come about, if you do not obey the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you” and one of those curses was, “Cursed *shall be* your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed *shall be* ... the produce of your ground, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock” (vv. 17-18). It was a time when “every man did what was right in his own eyes” and they were in the midst of a terrible famine as judgment from God for their unfaithfulness.

In the midst of such times, man has responded in one of two ways. They either run in an attempt to escape judgment, trying to make things right themselves, or they recognize the judgments of God and return to God in repentance. We have in chapter one of Ruth those who reject God’s covenant promises, those who accept God’s covenant promises, and we notice the results for those that turn back to God. We see in the lives of Ruth and Naomi that *repentance is the only way to live in the abundance of God’s favor.*

### **I. Rejecting God’s Covenant Promises (1:1-5)**

The first chapter of Ruth is comprised of three scenes. The first scene is a family on the move from Bethlehem to Moab. The second scene describes a return journey to Bethlehem, located at a crossroads between Moab and Bethlehem. The final scene ends back in Bethlehem.

#### **1. The choice**

The first scene is what Sinclair Ferguson describes as God “switching on the amber warning light” [*Faithful God*, 28]. The entire nation was in the midst of a severe famine at the hands of God for their unfaithfulness to His covenant. The book of Ruth is a narrative of one of the families affected by this famine, the family of Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, whose names mean ‘weakling’ and ‘pining.’ Through this judgment God

was saying to the nation, and to this family, “Remember my covenant with you. Remain in the covenant community and return to me. I do not desire to do you harm, but to do you good. I would that you would experience all of the covenant blessings I have for you. If you return to me, I will restore everything to you.” God had promised this in Deut. 30:2,3,9,10:

Return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons... then the LORD your God will have compassion on you... Then the LORD your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your cattle and in the produce of your ground, for the LORD will again rejoice over you for good, just as He rejoiced over your fathers; if you obey the LORD your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul.

Notice the reverse of the curse we read in Deut. 28. God then reminds them, “For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach.” So we see in God’s judgment the desire for repentance, of turning from their evil and wicked ways, from doing “that which was right in his own eyes,” to God who loved them and wanted His best for them.

Elimelech had a decision to make. He could stay in Bethlehem, “the house of bread,” where there was no food, grieve over his sin, return to God, and trust that God would provide for him. Or, he could flee from God to the land where the grass was greener and where food was in abundant supply. How does Elimelech respond? “**And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons... Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there**” (vv. 1-2). Instead of *turning back* to God, this family *turned their backs* on God. And they do so by fleeing to a place that defied God and His people altogether, the land of the Moabites. Hear how one writer describes Moab:

For Israel, Moab was known for several things, none of them good. The Moabites had originated out of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter (Gen. 19:30-38); their king Balak had hired Balaam to curse Israel when they came out of Egypt (Num. 22-24); their women had been a stumbling block to Israel in the wilderness, seducing them to the worship of false gods (Num. 25); and they had recently oppressed the Israelites in the days of Eglon (Judg. 3). [Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, 132]

Elimelech should have known better. His name literally means, “God is king.” However, we see that much like the rest of Israel who professed God as king, God was no more king in Elimelech’s life than He was king of the Moabites. There was no king in Elimelech’s life and he sought to take matters into his own hands, moving the family to Moab, which, in his eyes, provided the best prospects of supporting his family. In doing so, he rejects God’s covenant. He chose the road to nowhere.

However, let’s not be too quick to judge Elimelech. Is it possible that we too respond to life’s famines in quite the same fashion? We all face defining moments in our lives where we have opportunity to choose a course of action when things aren’t going as we think they should. And, if we are honest with ourselves, we often choose the land of comfort and security. Rather than spiritually assessing our situation, we flee from God rather than to God. This does not mean that every instance of famine in our life is God’s judgment for sin. There are times when we should seek a course of action, in and by the Spirit that would deliver us from an unfavorable circumstance. However, when it is a judgment from God, we are right where God wants us to

be. God's divine discipline serves the same purpose in the life of a believer, those He has covenanted with, as the famine did in the nation of Israel. It serves to drive us back to Him in repentance and faith. In times such as these, how do you react? Do you become the sovereign ruler in your life much like Elimelech did, denying *the* Sovereign Ruler, God and Christ? Heed the amber warning light! Many today take the name of Christian much like Elimelech took the name "God is king." And yet, they demonstrate by their actions that they are no more a Christian than God was king in Elimelech's heart. Do you truly possess Christ, or merely give lip service to a Christian profession and continue to live independently of God? If so, notice the result of Elimelech's decision.

## **2. The result**

I am sure that Elimelech was lured into a false sense of security when he arrived with his family in Moab. Food was plentiful and when he examined the situation, it seemed as if he had made a wise decision. Hence, his decision to remain in Moab. Why go back to the land of poverty where death from hunger was the norm?

Notice the tragic results of Elimelech's decision. **"Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons"** (v. 3). Now the family, minus a husband and father, had another decision to make. Do they repent of their sins and return to God, or do they remain in the land of Moab, separated from God. Their choice was the same as Elimelech's. They looked at their circumstances and determined that the prospect was still better in the far country, separated from God and dependent on self, than in returning to God and His Promised Land.

However, their decision to stay should not surprise us. There is some spiritual truth in the adage, "An apple does not fall far from the tree." Notice what happens next. **"They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years"** (v. 4). Mahlon and Chilion forthrightly disobey God's command not to intermarry with those outside the covenant (Deut. 7:3). They take for themselves Moabite wives. Here we see the spiraling effects of sin. As one writer put it, "Once entered upon, the road to continued and deepened disobedience is often smoothly paved and provides little resistance" [Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, 134].

This too is often the way it is for us. Rather than return to God and the "difficulties" associated with serving Him, it is often easier and more comfortable to remain on the outside. Sin numbs our spiritual senses. We are lulled into satisfaction in the creaturely comforts and wisdom of the world without recognizing that we are living for self and not for God. I am sure Mahlon and Chilion looked at their situation and thought, "Who else is there to choose from?" never recognizing that their decision was based on their defiance of God's covenant. It was easier for them to stay than return. And in the longer they stay in the far country, separated from God, the easier it becomes to sin. As one writer wisely observed, "Somehow, it seems easier to bear the pain of continued emptiness than to confess our pursuit of fullness in the wrong place" [Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, 134].

**"Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband"** (v. 5). The consequences of Elimelech's decision to reject God and go to the land of Moab continue to be evident. He is dead, his sons, much like their father, continue to live in the land of sin and find it easier and easier to sin the longer they remain there, and they now die, separated from God. So now, thanks to Elimelech, the tragedy falls on Naomi. Naomi's entire world came crashing down around her. She finds herself in a foreign land bereft of her husband and sons. She now faces a decision. How does she respond?

## **II. Trusting God's Covenant Promises (1:6-18)**

Imagine yourself in Naomi's situation. Here she is alone, grieving the deaths of her husband and two sons along with her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. We immediately see God at work in Naomi's life, **"Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food"** (v. 6). The hymn writer George Matheson penned the words,

"Oh Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee;  
I give Thee back the life I owe,  
That in Thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.

### **1. The return**

In the second scene, our story takes a decisive turn. We see some form of the Hebrew word *shub* no less than ten times in the remainder of this chapter. *Shub* means "to return," "to turn back," or "brought back." It is the Old Testament word for repentance or conversion. In this we see the theme of the book of Ruth. It is about turning back to God.

Notice Ruth does not question God. She does not shake her fist in God's face and ask, "How can you be a God of love and grace and allow this to happen to me?" No, she sees God at work behind these frowning providences. **"Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab."** She is able to do this because God has prepared her heart. She sees God at work in the midst of the storm, unlike her husband and sons earlier in their response to the famine.

Sinclair Ferguson gives a wonderful analogy that demonstrates God's love and mercy through painful times.

A sharp knife can be a destructive weapon in the hands of a murderer, but it can also be an instrument of healing in the hands of a surgeon. Everything depends on the hands that use it. In this case, God is working like a skilled surgeon. The painful surgery is part of a healing process. Thus, chastened by sore providence, Naomi seems to have been prepared by God to respond positively to the news she hears... The Lord has come to help his people by providing food for them (1:6). Covenant blessings have returned; there is a supply of food for the needy. The Lord opens Naomi's heart, and graciously brings her back through bitter experiences to his blessing. Naomi returns; she repents. [*Faithful God*, 33]

Naomi understood that God's famines are not permanent. The chastening is not forever, but for the moment. They are given to drive us back to God in repentance and faith. The Charleston Confession describes this repentance.

This saving repentance is an evangelical grace, whereby a person, being by the Holy Spirit made sensible of the manifold evils of his sin, doth, by faith in Christ, humble himself for it with godly sorrow, detestation of it, and self-aborrancy, praying for pardon and strength of grace, with a purpose and endeavour, by supplies of the Spirit, to walk before God unto all well-pleasing in all things. [15.3]

We see this repentance demonstrated in the life of Naomi in the remainder of the book.

## 2. The cost

At some point on the journey home, Naomi turns to her daughters-in-law and addresses them. This becomes a turning point in their lives as well. **“And 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. May 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”** (vv. 8-9). Notice how Naomi’s heart has changed. Now she is concerned about the things of the Lord. Both women initially agree to return with Naomi (v. 10). But Ruth reminds them both that life would be difficult for them without a husband that she could no longer provide for them, and even if she could, they would be much too old to enter into a relationship with them when a marriageable age was reached. Orpah, looking strictly at this biological truth, chooses to return to Moab and her people and their gods (v. 14). However, Ruth looks beyond the biological to the spiritual. Ruth again presses her to go return with Orpah.

Why is Naomi so persistent in urging Orpah and Ruth to return to their people and their gods? Because she now understood that repentance, returning to God, comes with demands. There is a cost of discipleship, to borrow from the title of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s well-known book. Nothing is guaranteed. When one submits to Christ, there is no promise of prosperity, no promise of security. What Naomi is doing is making Orpah and Ruth count the cost of discipleship. Jesus did this same thing in the account of the rich young ruler. He had an idol in his heart that Jesus tests. The young man was unwilling to part with his riches and went away disheartened. The cost of discipleship was too great for this man. It was too great for Orpah. She looked at the situation before her in this way,

Jehovah *plus* nothing in Bethlehem  
*or*  
everything *minus* Jehovah in Moab.  
[Ferguson, *Faithful God*, 38]

Orpah chooses Moab and their gods—but not Ruth. Notice her response in vv. 16-17, **“Do not urge me to leave you *or* turn back 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 I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if *anything but* death parts you and me.”** Does anything in Ruth’s response sound familiar to you. Ruth’s words, **“Your people *shall be* my people, and your God, my God”** are saturated with covenantal language. When God made His covenant with Israel, it was with this promise, “I will be your God, and you shall be My people” (Lev. 26:12; Gen. 17:7-8; Ex. 6:7). Ruth is in essence proclaiming her faith in God. Ruth is saying, “The God of Abraham who promised ‘I will be what I will be for my people’, the God who brought your people out of the land of Egypt, Naomi, that is my God!” Ruth’s testimony reveals much more than an undying love for her mother-in-law. It is a testimony of her willingness to serve the God of Naomi, whatever the cost. **“When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her”** (v. 18).

Before we move to the third scene, we need to understand Naomi’s place in the book of Ruth. Chapter One appears to revolve around Naomi’s trials and faith more so than Ruth’s. We almost get the sense that the book should be entitled Naomi. However, Ruth and her testimony serve as the crown jewel of the entire book. In her bitter providences and in her turning back to God, Naomi is the vehicle God uses to bring Ruth to faith in Him. As Sinclair Ferguson notes, “Ruth’s conversion is part of the explanation for Naomi’s pain... the story of Naomi is about

Ruth; or, more accurately, it is about God bringing Ruth to himself and positioning her life in the unfolding purposes for the world” [*Faithful God*, 40]. We will turn to those unfolding purposes in the next chapters.

Here we see that our trials and tribulations often come from God for a purpose that we do not comprehend while we are in the midst of the storm. William Cowper, the hymn writer that struggled deeply in depression and despondency, saw his trials as useful in God’s purposes, “God moves in a mysterious way His glorious wonders to perform.” The bitter providences of Naomi’s life served the glorious wonder of bringing Ruth to faith in Him. When you are in the midst of the storms of life, look for God’s glorious purposes!

### **III. Receiving God’s Covenant Promises (1:19-22)**

The third scene brings Naomi and Ruth back to Bethlehem. Much had changed in the ten years since Naomi’s departure. Where the land was in the midst of God’s judgment in famine when she left for Moab, they were now experiencing the bountiful harvest of God. It was a time of restoration because the people had repented of their sins and returned to God. They were living in obedience to His covenant. Bethlehem truly was a “house of bread.” The chapter opens in v. 1 with famine, and ends in harvest in v. 22. Just as the physical famine marked a time of spiritual famine in the life of Naomi, so the physical harvest marks a time of spiritual harvest.

But notice what happens. The people notice something different about Naomi. **“Is this Naomi?”** (v. 19). Naomi’s response to the stirring of the people is often misunderstood. She says, **“Do not call me Naomi** (which means ‘pleasant’); **call me Mara** (which means ‘bitter’), **for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi** (or ‘pleasant’), **since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?”** (vv. 20-21). Naomi’s testimony is not that she is bitter with God, but the path she has taken was bitter. She went out full, not materially, but in the fullness of her family, and she returned empty. Her testimony is that the LORD was involved in all of this. Her afflictions were warranted. Her pain was justified. But the Lord, she says, **“brought me back.”** Naomi wants to be called Mara as a testimony of how God had delivered her from bitterness by His grace. She wanted her name to serve as a picture of God’s deliverance from the bondage of sin.

### **Conclusion**

- (1) When you are in the midst of a famine, how do you respond? Look for God in the midst of the famine.**
- (2) If you have responded like Elimelech, then repent. There is forgiveness with God.**
- (3) Was this a surprising conversion?**