

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(August 4, 2013)

Ruth: Does God really care about me?

Jeff Harrison

### **The Painful Problem**

Ruth 1

#### **Introduction:**

##### **A. Carl (from *Up*) shows the danger of becoming sour in tragedy**

Have you seen the animated movie *Up*? It's the Disney movie with the elderly man who attaches helium balloons to his house to fly away on an adventure. Don't worry, I won't spoil the ending, or even the middle, but I'll tell you how it starts. Young, quiet Carl meets outgoing Ellie. Both have a passion for exploration and become fast friends. They marry and plan to travel on an adventure to the uncharted terrain of Paradise Falls. Along the way they experience setbacks – they are unable to have kids and struggle to save enough money for their adventure. But through thick and thin, Carl and Ellie stick together, and eventually, it looks like they're finally going to Paradise Falls. But before they can go, Ellie dies, and Carl is left all alone. Over time, Carl becomes a sour recluse who feels like he has nothing to live for.

Now I'm not a big softie when it comes to movies. In fact, it's possible that there have been a few times when Stephanie and I have been watching a movie, and she looks over at me, with surprise, and then maybe just a hint of disapproval, as she sees that I'm not crying along with her at a tear jerking scene. However, in this case, as we saw Carl's plight, we cried together. Thanks a lot Disney - wasn't expecting to be bawling like a baby 15 minutes into a kid's movie. Now we cried for Carl because he lost his spouse and his lifelong dream, and turned into a bitter, lonely recluse. And I believe I also cried for myself, thinking about the possibility of losing Stephanie and wondering if a bitter root would take hold in my life.

##### **B. In tragedy we can wonder, "Does God really care about me?"**

Now some of you have given me the privilege of sharing your stories with me. So I know that many of us have experienced, or seen someone close to us experience, some horribly painful trials. And I'm only aware of a portion of the hardships represented in this room. In times of crushing pain, perhaps, like Carl, some of us have grown a little bitter about life, and perhaps even towards God. For in the face of ongoing hardship, it can be tempting to wonder, "Does God really care about me?"

Now I feel inadequate to cover such a weighty topic. For it's a question I struggle with at times, and I know some of you have endured far more difficult trials. So I hope you'll join with me in praying for our church family this month, as we cover the book of Ruth, which speaks to this pointed question, "Does God really care about me?" It's such an important topic. After all, who wants to disengage from life and become sour towards God?

So, if you've got a Bible, please turn to Ruth chapter 1. Ruth 1. Ruth is the 8<sup>th</sup> book in the Bible, right after the book of Judges. I pray that God, this morning and for the whole series, will speak to us powerfully through His Word and His presence among us.

## **I. Prologue – Ruth 1:1-2**

### **A. Period - time of the Judges**

Please follow along with me as I read Ruth 1:1. "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land." To give you some context, before the time of Judges, Moses led God's people out of Egypt. Then Joshua took command and led God's people in taking over part of the Promised Land. Now after Joshua's death until the eventual crowning of King Saul is a couple of hundred year period known as the time of Judges. This is when our story takes place. It's a dark time in Israel's history. In fact, the book of Judges says multiple times that, "in those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." It was a time of multiple rebellions against God that led to God disciplining His people.

### **B. Character introductions**

Now in this dark period, the town of Bethlehem, located five miles south of Jerusalem, experienced a famine. This was no doubt a painful irony for the people, for Bethlehem in the Hebrew language means "house of bread."

So let's continue the story, starting with the rest of verse 1. "and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went to the country of Moab and remained there."

So there's a man named Elimelech, and his name in Hebrew means "My God is King." It's perhaps another painful irony that someone's whose name means "My God is King" is leaving God's Promised Land to find food in a pagan territory. Now Elimelech starts as the central character; notice how everyone else is described based on their relationship to him.

For example, Naomi is described as the wife of Elimelech. Now the name Naomi means “pleasant” or “delightful.” Elimelech’s sons are named Mahlon and Chilion, which mean “weak” and “sickly.” For the curious, here’s one of a few possible explanations I’ve heard for someone naming their kids “weak” and “sickly.” Dr. Gordon Johnston, a seminary professor of mine who helped my understanding of Ruth, noted that in those times it was common to wait to name a child until they were a little older and you could start to see their main characteristic. Sadly, because of the famine, perhaps Elimelech’s sons were characterized by their weakness.

So Elimelech, seeing his sons wasting away, takes the family fifty miles east to look for food among the pagan Moabites. So, was it a good idea for Elimelech to leave the Promised Land in search of food? Scholars debate this issue. Some view Elimelech’s actions as a sinful attempt to flee God’s punishment. They note that the Israelites were often in sin during the Judges period, and that Deuteronomy 28 says famine is one potential consequence for rebellion. These scholars argue that the family should have stayed in the Promised Land and repented of their sin, and that their failure to do so led to the fate of Elimelech, the fertility struggles, and eventually, the death of the sons.

However, other scholars note that famine is not always described as a judgment from God. For example, in Genesis both Abraham and Jacob left the land because of famine and in both cases ended up better off. These scholars also note that although God judges His rebellious people multiple times in the book of Judges, there is no mention of God punishing through famine. Obviously the fate of the clan of Elimelech is tragic. But these scholars note that human suffering is not always due to a specific sin. For example, early in the book of Job, Job undergoes horrible suffering, but the book clarifies that the suffering is not due to any specific sin on Job’s part. We also see this idea in John 9, when the disciples ask Jesus whether a man was blind because of his sin or his parents’ sin and Jesus says, “Neither.”

Now interestingly, the narrator does not directly comment on whether or not it was appropriate for the family to move for a time to Moab.<sup>1</sup> Given that the narrator does not comment on this issue, perhaps it is best to consider the famine and time in Moab as background that helps set the stage for our story, rather than a big theme that helps us understand the story.

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<sup>1</sup> “Gar” in the Hebrew in verse 1 means a temporary (not permanent) sojourner. The fact that Elimelech does not sell his land also could suggest the possibility that he planned to return when the famine ended.

For as we go through the book, we'll see that Ruth is not a tragic story focused on sin and its consequences.

But, whether or not one sees God's judgment early in this story, an ancient Jewish listener would have likely expected a tragic ending. That's because the book of Judges has two stories of people leaving Bethlehem, both of which end very poorly. In the first, a priest named Jonathan left Bethlehem and led a false worship center that plagued the Jews for 100s of years. In the second, a wife left Bethlehem with her husband and ended up violated and killed, leading to a Jewish civil war. And if that's not enough, the Moabites had a checkered past with Israel.

## **II. Introduction to the Problem – Ruth 1:3-21**

### **A. Naomi's lack of food and family**

Now staring at verse 3, and through the rest of chapter 1, we see the narrator develop the problem of our story. Ruth is not about how to properly date, although it's sometimes taught that way. So what's it about? Well let's start to examine the problem as we cover verses 3-5. "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."

What a devastating series of events for Naomi, who with Elimelech's death, is now the central character, as the others are now described based on their relationship to her. So poor Naomi endures the horrors of famine; then she has to bury her husband. Then her sons get married, but both struggle with infertility, and then she watches both sons die. As it says in verse 5, "the woman was left." Naomi is alone - no husband, no kids, and no grandkids. And in that culture, it was an enormous devastation to have one's family line end with you. And if that's not enough, she also finds herself a vulnerable widow living in a pagan country. Further, the original audience would have been suspicious of Naomi's daughters-in-law. For the Moabite people had an unfortunate beginning; they came from Abraham's nephew Lot having relations with his daughter. And in the book of Numbers Moabite women seduced many Israelite men into worshipping a false god. Further, at one point during the period of Judges the Moabites oppressed Israel for eighteen years.

### **B. Naomi tries to talk her daughters-in-law into returning home**

Now thankfully, the end of verse 6 gives a ray of hope in this great darkness. It says that, “the Lord had visited his people and given them food.” The famine is over in Bethlehem. God has aided His people, so Naomi decides to journey back to Bethlehem. However, we’ll see that Naomi does not think that God cares about her. And so she tries to convince her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to not return to Bethlehem with her.

Look at verse 8 with me - “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 word “kindly” here is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means “loyal love.” It is repeated frequently in the book. Now in the next few verses Naomi continues to tell her daughters-in-law to return home, as Ruth and Orpah insist that they’re returning with her to Bethlehem. The Hebrew word for “return” (*sub*) is the key word in Ruth 1. It’s mentioned in verses 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, and 22.

Now to make her argument against the daughters-in-law returning with her, Naomi reminds Ruth and Orpah in verse 11 that she has no more sons for them to marry. Then notice how Naomi really increases the intensity of her argument at the end of verse 13. There she says, “No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” In other words, Naomi is saying, “Look, God’s really against me, so if you stick with me, you’re courting further personal disaster.” Now perhaps some of us can identify a bit with Naomi’s feelings. You’ve lost something really dear to your heart, and as a result, you feel like God is against you.

### **C. Ruth returns with bitter Naomi**

Look now at verse 14 - “Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.” We see in verse 14 that Orpah decided to take Naomi’s advice and return to her family. But, Ruth, whose name means “refreshment” or “friend”<sup>2</sup>, sticks with Naomi. However, Naomi continues to try to talk Ruth out of joining her. Look with me at verse 15 –“See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” Again, we see Naomi’s heart towards the Lord at this point, as she encourages Ruth to return not only to her family, but to her gods. It’s obviously bad advice, but given Naomi’s perspective, she may have genuinely thought that the best thing for Ruth was

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT, 94.

to return home. For Ruth to grieve among her family and people, and try to marry again and start a new family, far away from what Naomi thinks is God's curse against her.

But the adamant mother-in-law has not won over the even more persistent daughter-in-law. In verses 16-17 Ruth says, "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."

Naomi does not realize it yet, but God still cares. In the midst of that horribly dark time of suffering in Moab, God had not left her. During that darkness, even though God knows that Naomi grows more embittered towards Him, He shines His grace in her life in the form of Ruth. For Ruth cares deeply about Naomi, and as we get further in the story, we'll see God work through Ruth to bless Naomi in incredible ways.

Now, what if Ruth had instead decided to take Naomi's advice and head home? I'm not sure things would have turned out well for Naomi. But thankfully, we don't know. For Ruth leaves everything she knows to be committed to Naomi, a bitter broken old woman, and to her God. Ruth's commitment is so strong that in verse 17 she commits to stay even after Naomi dies and then be buried with Naomi's family. And if that's not enough, a foreign woman in that day is probably not finding any legitimate work that could support her, not to mention Naomi.

So this is not like moving to Houston and trying to find a job in your current field. Ruth's decision would be more like you seeing your spouse pass away, and then deciding to move to a foreign land where you don't know anyone but your mother-in-law, you'll probably struggle to keep food on the table, and you'll be vulnerable to racism, and maybe even sexual abuse; all so that you can take care of your bitter mother-in-law for the rest of her life. One commentator noted that Ruth's commitment could remind the audience of Abraham, who also aligned himself with the true God as he moved to a foreign land. However, unlike Abraham, Ruth makes her choice without any sort of promise of blessing from God.<sup>3</sup>

And from an earthly perspective, it looks like Ruth might be throwing her entire future away just to keep her bitter mother-in-law from having to suffer alone. Now I don't want to offend any mothers-in-law in the audience, including my own. But as we sometimes see a bride and groom quote Ruth's commitment from verses 16 and 17 on their wedding day, I'm not sure

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT.

many of them have their mothers-in-law in mind. God has provided Naomi a true friend, one showing her an incredible display of *hesed*, loyal love.

So Naomi and Ruth journey to Bethlehem together. When they arrive, the women of Bethlehem are stirred - is this Naomi? Lets pick it up in verse 20 – “She said to them, ‘Do not call me Naomi [remember, Naomi means “pleasant”]; call me Mara [which means “bitter”], 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?’”

### **III. Application -**

#### **A. If you feel like Naomi, look for a “Ruth” who can help**

Notice Naomi’s view of God. She thinks He’s powerful, for she calls Him Almighty, but she does not think He is good. She bitterly lashes out, saying that God has made her bitter, brought her back empty, and afflicted her. Naomi thinks that God does not care about her. Her bitterness is so great that she says, in front of poor Ruth who has left everything to follow her, that she’s empty.

Now the book of Ruth is a story, so some of it is meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive. In other words, sometimes we should not copy what a character thinks or does. Just because Naomi blamed God for all her suffering doesn’t mean it’s true. And just because she’s throwing herself a great pity party and lashing out at others doesn’t mean that you or I should do the same when we struggle.

But if you’re feeling like Naomi, I hope you’ll look around and see if there are any “Ruths” in your life. A loving and mature friend, one you could tell how you’re really doing. Now we know not everyone is a safe person. So if you’re struggling to believe that God cares about you, please choose who you share that struggle with wisely. But I hope and pray that you have a friend who will weep with you, walk with you, and gently help you to interpret your circumstances in light of God, rather than interpreting God in light of your circumstances. A source of refreshment that brings grace and truth into your life, as they help you consider the possibility that God cares about you after all.

#### **B. Consider God’s care as you reflect on Gail’s story**

Now chapter 1 gives us some background for our story, and then introduces our problem. The problem is that poor, vulnerable Naomi has lost her husband, her sons, and has grown bitter

towards a God that she thinks is out to get her. As Naomi says it, “I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.” Now we are not yet far enough along in the book of Ruth to fully answer the question, “Does God really care about me?” But I don’t want to leave anyone who is struggling today hanging. After all, some of us who are hurting may not immediately have a “Ruth-like” friend who can help. As a result, I’ve asked one of the members of our church family, Gail, to share about a period of hardship in her life, and the ways that she saw God’s care for her during that time. So Gail, please come to the front and share with us...

### **Conclusion:**

#### **A. Response to Gail’s comments**

Thank so much for sharing Gail. That’s a great testimony of God’s care in the midst of an ongoing hardship. As you said, things certainly didn’t happen on your time table. And maybe you didn’t always see God’s sustaining work as clearly as your daughter saw it. But God was at work during that time, and we’re thankful that you’re now enjoying a rich season with your family. And for those who don’t know, another expression of God’s care in the story is that Gail’s husband is now a key leader at the church and led us in the Lord’s Supper this morning.

#### **B. Chapter one ends with a note of hope – Ruth 1:22**

Now if you’re going through a rough season, and God feels a million miles away, or even against you, I’ve been praying for you this week. I hope Gail’s testimony of God’s care in her hardship has encouraged you to consider anew that perhaps God really cares about you. That He’s at work, behind the scenes, in your life, even today.

Now as we close, let’s look at the last verse of chapter 1. “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 the barley harvest.” In this final verse, we see a few hints that might foreshadow better days for Naomi. Despite what Naomi says, maybe she’s not totally empty. After all, she has Ruth with her, an incredibly loyal companion. And although chapter 1 starts with a departure due to famine, it ends here in verse 22 with a return right at harvest time.

So as we finish our service this morning, let’s go in prayer to the God who brought that harvest, and who can work powerfully in our lives, even in our times of famine. Let’s pray...

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.