

RUTH - Wk 1

“Trusting God in Our Suffering”

10/31/21

Ruth 1

Introduction to Series

Tim. Pastor. **Ruth 1** (gonna need a Bible today). *Faithful God* (Ferguson). Joke about resources. **Pray.**

Favorite Movie. To start this evening, I want you to take a second and think about your favorite book or movie. Think about the **story** - how does the plot develop? Is it suspenseful, is there uncertainty, joy, conflict? Think about the **characters** - the protagonist, the antagonist, that quirky best friend who everyone loves because they're so funny even though they aren't helpful to the movie at all. Think about your favorite book or movie and the story that it tells.

Now let me ask you a question → **Have you ever noticed that stories have the power to affect us like facts and bullet points can't?**

For instance, think about *The Lion King*. I could tell you some **facts** about what happens in *The Lion King*:

- I could tell you that there is an area called the Pride Lands, and that the King of the Pride Lands is a lion named Mufasa. Mufasa has a jealous younger brother named Scar who wants his throne.
- So one day, Scar tricks Mufasa's son Simba into a gorge, there's a stampede, when Mufasa comes to save him Scar kills him.

That would be some facts about the set up of the conflict in *The Lion King*, but that doesn't grip you and move you like actually turning on the movie and watching the scene where Mufasa lays on the ground dead, and Simba is pressing his face up against his saying “wake up, wake up”. That's the real tear-jerking kind of moment right?

Stories have the power to move us. Stories have the power to affect us like facts and bullet points can't.

This week we are beginning a new sermon series through a story that has the power to move us.

Over the next four weeks we will journey into the story of Ruth.

Now typically Ruth gets labeled as a story about love. It gets preached or quoted at weddings, or used as material for sermons or classes on dating. We use it to admonish single folks - “Wait for your Boaz!”

But when you start reading and actually studying the story it really has little to do with romance or dating or marriage at all.

It's not a story about romance, primarily it's a story about God and His faithfulness to His people. A story about God's faithfulness that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, can move us towards trusting God potentially in a way that facts and bullet points can't.

So as we journey through this story together over the next four weeks, we're going to ask ourselves one question. We're going to look at it and explore it in different ways each week, but here's the question over and over again we're going to ask ourselves: **Will we trust God?**

Will we trust God? Who moves in mysterious ways, who works wonders, who knows all things and holds all things together? Who works all things for His glory and the good of those who love Him. Will we place our lives in His hands, or will we take control and try to be our own gods and kings?

That's the question for us in the story of Ruth.

And what I want to do tonight is to ask the question in this particular way. I think this is the push of chapter 1: **Will we trust God when we suffer?**

Walkthrough

Ruth 1. I want to walk us through the story, it's gonna take us a little bit of time but I want to show us what's happening here, what's going on with these people. So we'll work through it, I'll give some running commentary along the way, and then I'll circle back around at the end and apply it into our lives. (You're gonna want a Bible to follow along, 8th book in, also in the bulletin).

Ruth 1:1

1 In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land....

If you're not familiar, 1000 years or so before Jesus, God's people, the Israelites were ruled by kings. But even before that, they were led for about 400 years by *judges*.

During the time of judges, God's people, were in a cycle:

- Rebel
- Discipline
- Judge
- Repent
- Rebel

A summary of this time can actually be found in the verse in the Bible right before this, the end of the book of Judges, **Judges 21:25** where it reads - **"In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in His own eyes."**

So the astute ancient Jewish listener would hear this story and know exactly what is taking place here. We're in the middle of the discipline part of the cycle.

This famine is not by chance or some random weather pattern → Famines were a marker in the Old Testament of discipline for the people of God. This is one of the ways God disciplines His people for their sin and to get their attention.

*Now it's important to mention here that suffering doesn't always happen, in the Scriptures or in our lives, because of our sin. We live in a broken world. Suffering is a part of that. Just because you are suffering doesn't necessarily mean it's because of sin in your life. **But** this particularly suffering in the famine is a result of God's discipline of His people for their rebellion.

The people of God are rebelling against him, God sends a famine as a means of discipline....

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.

ELIMELECH

The narrative zooms in on one man, Elimelech, and his family, who leave Bethlehem and go to Moab in search of food. Now we can certainly sympathize with a guy trying to provide for his family right? There's a famine in Bethlehem, he's got mouths to feed, just trying to provide.

So on the one hand, this response to leave the land and go to Moab makes total sense.

But if you know the backdrop, this is actually a sinful response to his suffering for Elimelech to do this. Why?

A few reasons:

- 1) Elimelech would have known the promises of God to His people in times of famine. Most notably, he would have known the promise of God in **Deuteronomy 30** - If God's people would turn and repent and follow Him, He would bless them with "fruit of the ground." - With crops and with food. So he should know - this famine is not random chance suffering, it's an invitation from God to His people to repent.
- 2) God had called Elimelech to live in Bethlehem. This area was a part of the promised land of Canaan. God brought His people, not only out of Egypt, but to this land. God called His people to settle here, not in Moab.
- 3) Elimelech goes to Moab. Moab is not a place that is friendly to the people of God. There are numerous OT stories about how the Moabites antagonized and attacked the Israelites.

So instead of faithfully remaining in the *land of promise*, viewing this famine as an invitation from the Lord to repent and turn back to Him, Elimelech takes his family to *land of compromise*.

Elimelech's way of dealing with his suffering is through sin.

Elimelech, whose very name means "My God is King", chose to become His own king. Instead of following the path of repentance and faith, trusting in the Lord to provide for his needs in the Promised Land, he chose the path of compromise to Moab.

When his life became difficult and burdensome, when he faced suffering, Elimelech became a living example of Judges 21:25 - turning his back on God and doing what is right in his own eyes - and then it begins a slippery slope.

Keep reading...

2 (cont.) They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

What was once a temporary trip to find some food, has now become a settling. It's comfortable here, there's food for us, let's settle in for a little bit.

3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth.

The disobedience of Elimelech to lead his family to Moab trickles down into the disobedience of his sons to marry Moabite women. **This is off limits for the people of God.** Deuteronomy 7, God expressly forbids His people to marry women from foreign nations. Look at what he says:

(He gives a whole list of nations and then he says) **Deuteronomy 7:3-4:**

3 You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods.

This is not God favoring one race over another or disallowing interracial marriages - This is God trying to protect His people. The Israelites were the Old Testament people of God, and God knows - if you marry someone who does not worship me, it is not going to go well for your faith. You're going to end up turning your back on me.

So Elimelech disobeys God, goes to Moab. Now his sons are disobeying God in who they marry.

Elimelech's suffering has led him and now his family to sin. That's their response. Instead of trusting God in the midst of the suffering of the famine, they choose to be their own gods and they turn away from Him.

Elimelech and his family choose sin over trust in the midst of their suffering.

NAOMI

Now the narrative shifts, and we turn our attention to Naomi, Elimelech's widow. Vs 3:

3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, 5 and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Naomi, whose name means "pleasant", has lived all but a pleasant life. She's settled in a foreign land, away from her family. Her husband dies. We're not told why or when, just that he passes away. This in itself is a tragedy, but there is a small glimmer of hope - her two sons.

They take wives, and yet even in the course of 10 years, there is barrenness. In this culture they would have had several children by now if they could, but there's no new life, no grandchildren are born. And then it gets even worse - her two sons die.

Naomi has suffered so much. As a widow, she lacks the provision and protection of a husband in male-dominated ancient society. Now her life insurance option of sons is also gone, they have passed away as well. She's in a foreign land. At this point she has aged to the point where her three options for care are probably closed off to her:

- Parents are most likely dead.
- Too late for her to get remarried.
- Has no children to provide for her.

Destitute type of situation. Deep and horrific brokenness and suffering. All she has now is two foreign, anti-God daughters in law.

6 Then she 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.

First glimmers of hope in the text. Took us 6 verses but now we see a little bit of the Lord's kindness - food has returned to Bethlehem. No more famine.

7 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.

Naomi is heading back to her people in Bethlehem, but while on the road, she pleads with her two daughters in law - Orpah and Ruth - to leave and go back to Moab, to not come with her.

10 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?"

Do you hear the hopelessness in Naomi's voice? She's repeatedly pleading with Orpah and Ruth - go back to your people. Don't come to Bethlehem with me, go back to the Moabites. Get married. Have kids. There is no future for you here with me.

Then almost in destitute sarcasm she says what is obvious - even if I were to get married (which she won't) and have some kids, are you gonna wait until they're old enough to get married? That's ridiculous. Zero hope left in Naomi.

Which she states clearly in the very next sentence....

13 (cont.) No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me."

This is a shocking statement from an Israelite in the Old Testament. This phrase **"the hand of the Lord has gone out against me"** was reserved for the way God would work against His people's enemies. A foreign nation who tried to attack God's people, Pharaoh who held them in slavery - The hand of the Lord went out against them. This was a phrase reserved only for enemies of God, never His people.

But that is how Naomi views her life now. God has dealt with me like His enemy. Not as a part of His people, not as one welcomed in, loved, cared for - as an enemy.

So notice → while Elimelech's response to suffering was sin, Naomi's response to her suffering is bitterness.

Her very real, very painful suffering has opened the door for a bitter heart - against God and against others.

14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 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." 16 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."

In our culture we are moved by these words from Ruth - we buy prints from Hobby Lobby and hang them on the wall, we say them to each other at wedding ceremonies. But look at Naomi's response...

18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

The literal translation of Naomi's response (1:18) - "When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped talking to her." Folks who are getting married soon, go ahead and plan that for your wedding ceremony. Have one person vow these words and the other person not speak to them for the rest of the night.

Naomi's suffering has left her so bitter she cannot recognize or receive Ruth's kindness. She literally says nothing. No response.

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?" 20 She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi ("pleasant"); call me Mara ("bitter"), for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.

Some translations - "I left with a lot, and the Lord brought me back with nothing." She doesn't even acknowledge Ruth is with her. "I got no one and nothing with me." That's how bitter and downtrodden Naomi is.

21 (cont.) Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"

Naomi's very real pain and suffering has left her not pressing into the Lord, but turning away from the Lord.

She's so deeply hurt and bitter against God that she can't see Him at all. She can't see His **character**, she can't see His **kindness**, she can't see **what He is doing** in the midst of this. Her suffering has blinded her to the reality of who God is.

And this is not like a "Naomi, count your blessings!" type deal. Where she just needs to look on the bright side of life. **Her husband and two sons have died. She is left without hope for any sort of future. This is real suffering.** And yet in the midst of that suffering, it has turned her heart away from the Lord. She's given up on God. She's blind to His character, she's blind to who God is and what He is still doing even in the midst of this hard...

That He is working - a harvest is returning to Bethlehem, Ruth has just pledged herself to her - I will be with you until the very end! The story is not over for her. And yet Naomi's heart is so callous from pain, so broken by suffering, she cannot see the Lord and she cannot receive from His hand.

Application into Lives

Here's what I want us to see → We all in this room, have gone, are going, and will go through suffering.

Maybe to a lesser degree than Elimelech and Naomi, maybe to a greater degree - I don't think it matters - suffering is suffering. Some of that suffering will be punishment and discipline from the Lord as a result of our sin, some of it will just be living as broken people in a broken world this side of eternity with Jesus.

All of us have gone, are going, and will go through suffering.

And when we do, in our sin and in our flesh we are going to be pulled to respond like Elimelech and like Naomi.

Like Elimelech - we are going to be tempted in our suffering, to not trust God, but to choose the path of compromise and sin.

We're pressed, we're crushed by the weight of suffering, and instead of running to the Lord, trusting Him, throwing ourselves onto Him and His mercy and His kindness in our trials, instead we look at other things we think are going to help us, fix us, cure us, alleviate the pain.

- I know I shouldn't drink this much, but I've had a hard week.
- I know I shouldn't lash out at my spouse or my kids or my roommates, but I'm under so much pressure at work.
- I know I shouldn't pull back and isolate from community, but my depression is so strong right now and I just can't bring myself to be around people.

We face suffering, and we compromise and sin, instead of running to God.

Current Season. If I can be honest, I know it's church, but I am in this fight right now. The past few months have been really really difficult for me. There's been loss, and hurt - hurt done to me, hurt I've done to others. Pain of unmet expectations, and trial.

I feel this tangible pull on me to try to find relief for my suffering somewhere or in something other than God. To find it by escaping - escaping with food, with alcohol, with binge-watching tv, with just whatever I can do to get away from my responsibilities.

Or to find relief in over-exerting - trying to manipulate, or coerce, or use aggression and anger and hostility towards those around me.

In case I begin to think too highly of myself, the Lord in His kindness has been using my suffering to remind me → There's no shortage of idols and sins in my heart. A hundred different things my heart wants to run after to try to alleviate the suffering.

And yet I have to remind myself over and over again - those don't bring life or healing or comfort → Jesus does. God is faithful. My suffering should lead me towards Him, not away from Him.

Like Elimelech, we face suffering, and we compromise and sin, instead of running to God.

But we can also be like Naomi....

Like Naomi - we are going to be tempted in our suffering, to not trust God and go to Him with godly lament, but to turn away from Him in bitterness and despair.

In our suffering we write one of two narratives. If I'm going through this then there's two options:

- God is good, but He's not powerful.
- Or God is powerful, but He's not good.

For Naomi - God is powerful, but He's not good. Her suffering has deadened her heart → "God's hand has gone out against me." And she misses the very kindness of God through Ruth right in front of her.

We can become so focused on our suffering that we miss God. We miss His grander story. We miss what He's doing. The brokenness of our own lives turns our gaze inward and we lose sight of the fact that God is doing something even in the midst of our suffering.

An easy way to know if you're here is - how do you respond to the truths of God?

- When you're reading Scripture, and the Spirit stirs something in you, how do you respond? Do you receive the promises and kindness and correction of God, or are you cold to it?
- When you're in group, and you're sharing your struggles, suffering, hardship and someone reminds you of the truth of God's character, His faithfulness and kindness - is your first response disbelief? Doubt? "Yeah, that's true but not for me. Or that's not helpful right now."

That's evidence that like Naomi your suffering may have entrenched you in your bitterness. It's gone past lament. Good, godly grief.

The invitation for us to be a church that is able to grieve and suffer well. Not to have false pretenses that everything has to always be awesome. We are free, in Christ, to have sorrow, to weep, to cry, to mourn what is broken and what we have lost and will lose - **and yet part of lamenting well is weeping fully and hoping still.**

But like Naomi, we can become so entrenched in our bitterness at God that we begin to write a narrative about Him and miss His hand. Miss what He might be doing in us, with us, through us, around us. Our bitterness makes us miss God's kindness, doubt His goodness, doubt even His power.

Ruth - Trust and Sacrifice

But there's a third option shown to us in this passage. **And that is Ruth....**

Look back with me at verses 14-17:

14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 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." 16 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.”

The Hebrew structure of this promise from Ruth to Naomi is quite shocking. It reads much more simply and directly in the Hebrew. She basically says - **“Your land, my land. Your people, my people. Your God, my God. Your resting place, my resting place.”**

Ruth is committing everything about her life to Naomi. She’s giving up her:

- **Geography and homeland** - committing to Bethlehem and life among Jewish people.
- **Future** - she’s committed until death to be buried in the same place as Naomi.
- **Family Ties** - your people are now my people. I’m taking off my Moabite identity and taking on the identity of Jew.
- **Religion** - Your God is my God. No more worship of these false gods and idols. I’m following Yahweh.

The best way to describe this scene is as a conversion experience. Other non-Jewish people in the OT up until this point had praised Yahweh or spoken highly of Yahweh, but Ruth completely abandons her old identity, nationality, and religion and commits herself to God and His people.

That’s the power of Ruth’s statement in these verses. Ruth’s declaration in verses 16 and 17 is not primarily about her commitment to Naomi. It is primarily about her commitment to God. She is saying, **“Naomi, the reason I belong to you is because I belong to God.”**

I trust 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.

I’m trusting that God is faithful in our suffering. I’m not choosing sin, I’m not choosing bitterness, I’m choosing trust.

And the invitation for us as the reader is to see Ruth and consider → Will this be true of us as well?

Will we be like Ruth and trust God’s hand in our suffering?

To not give in to sin, to being our own king, to bitterness towards God....but to trust Him. To commit ourselves to Him and to His people. Even when it is hard, seems uncertain, we’re called to remember that in Christ we, like Ruth, have put off our old identity, our old way of life, being our own rulers and authority - that we have declared God is our God - I’m all in on God and I’m all in on His people - and are called to live as if that is true.

To say like Ruth → God will be faithful.

- In uncertainty and doubt - God will be faithful.
- When sin seems so much easier - God will be faithful.
- When it doesn’t make sense - God will be faithful.
- When our suffering is tangible - God will be faithful.
- When others abandon to go back home - God will be faithful.

Sovereignty of God

And we do this, church - because there’s a 4th character in Ruth 1. Not just Elimelech, Naomi, and Ruth. There’s one more character at play → And that is **God Himself.**

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.

Chapter 1 starts with a famine in the land, brokenness, sin, and suffering - and it ends with a glimmer of hope. Naomi and Ruth, back with God's people, back in the promised land, at the beginning of a harvest.

God is still working. The story is not over. It does not end with bitterness. It does not end with brokenness. It does not end with sin. God is still working.

In all of this - the sin of Elimelech, the bitterness of Naomi, the confidence of Ruth - we see the first glimpses of what will be true in the story of Ruth and in the story of history - **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.

John Piper - "Taken as a whole, the story of Ruth is one of those signs. It was written to give us encouragement and hope that all the perplexing turns in our lives are going somewhere good. They do not lead off a cliff. In all the setbacks of our lives as believers, God is plotting for our joy."

There is a deeper grace at work amidst the sin, suffering, and sacrifices of the people in this story. God is doing something, working something, moving us somewhere.

Gospel

As we consider the opening of this story we are meant to see **a deeper promise**. We are meant to look past Ruth to an even larger story of the grace and sovereignty of God.

This story of Ruth points us forward to a larger story of God's redemptive plan - **which involves our sin and our suffering, and the suffering and sacrifice of our Savior.**

The greatest answer to whether or not we can trust our lives, our hearts, ourselves to God is found not in the wonderful story and examples in Ruth, but is found ultimately in the cross.

God shows us in the cross a sacrifice greater than Ruth's, a sacrifice of His only Son. Who took our sin, took our suffering and was nailed to a tree. Dying the death we deserved, and yet rising again three days later to defeat our sin, to defeat our enemy, and to defeat our suffering and death.

So as we look at the story of Ruth, and we see the sin of Elimelech, the bitterness of Naomi, the sacrifice of Ruth we ask the question → **Will we trust God and can we trust God when we suffer?**

The answer in the midst of our doubts, uncertainties, confusion, and pain - **Yes. Watch what he does in the lives of Ruth and Naomi, but even better - look ahead to what he does in the cross of Christ.**

- You don't have to be your own king and let suffering lead to sin - look at the risen King of all, King Jesus.
- You don't have to give in to bitterness towards God in your suffering - look at the suffering of your Savior for you.
- You are not alone - Christ has promised to be near to the brokenhearted, the suffering, and the downtrodden.

So we can look at our Savior, and say with Ruth → **God will be faithful in our suffering.**

Pray.

Communion.

