

## THE SURVIVOR

Ruth 1:1-5

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This past July 4<sup>th</sup> off the coast of Brookings, OR, the dreams of two families crashed into the Pacific Ocean. One wife and children along with another father, mother, and children suddenly had a father, son, and another son torn away from them. These remaining spouses, parents, and siblings are the survivors of a family calamity.

A young athlete's potential for a college athletic scholarship and possibly a professional career ended before it began due to a freak accident. Everything he had been working for and looking forward to was gone. How can he survive such a calamity and even grow through it?

A couple who had planned well for their imminent retirement were suddenly faced with the onslaught of Alzheimer's. The spouse was left with the job of picking up the pieces of life. How can such a spouse face each day and get the most out of life?

These are all challenges that friends of ours in Grants Pass have faced in the past few months. Some are Christians and some are not. God hasn't promised to keep any of us from problems or injustices that shatter dreams and force us down roads we never wanted to or even expected to go. But He is a God who can rescue our broken dreams and our broken lives and transform our calamities into something worthwhile, when we humbly seek His face. He is the God who, as we seek His face, can empower us to move through such calamities with hope and purpose.

That's the overall message of the book of **Ruth**. **Ruth** tells the true story of a family in crisis, whose dreams of living a fulfilled life suddenly appeared to be irreparably destroyed. Ruth is the story of God's redeeming the lives of those living in the midst of an evil society during the wickedness of that period of Israel's history known as the Judges. It's the story of a woman whose expectations have been shattered by a bewildering series of calamities. It's a story about people who can't change the past, but who, if they seek after

Him and, if necessary, repent from their foolish ways, find that God can turn their tragedy into triumph, and a bad set of circumstances into new blessings.

To really appreciate this four-chapter book, it helps to see it displayed properly highlighted, a bright diamond that it is, set against a black backdrop of Israel's history. Like the book of **Judges** which precedes it, **Ruth** takes place during the same evil time period. These two books are inextricably tied together. To study **Ruth** without considering **Judges** would be to miss the point of the book.

As the last three chapters of **Judges** focus on the lives of specific people during this period, so does **Ruth**. But these two segments of the Bible stand in stark contrast to each other. **Judges** ends in despair due to people's depravity, while **Ruth** ends in deliverance and hope due to people's very little faith and God's amazing grace.

Interestingly, in the last three chapters of both books, the city of Bethlehem plays a key role. The final two stories in the book of **Judges** take place in or near Bethlehem, the center stage for sin. If these chapters were all we knew about the small town of Bethlehem, we would place it in the same moral category as we do Sodom and Gomorrah. But in the book of **Ruth**, God grants one more positive "Bethlehem story" to show that there is redemption and grace in the most unlikely of places for what we may think are the most unworthy of people. Have you ever felt like you were unworthy to experience God's forgiveness, love, or blessing because of some failure in your life? If you have, the book of **Ruth** teaches us that no one is beyond the love and redemption of God. God is the transformer of tragedy into triumph. **Ruth** is a book of hope for the hopeless.

Just for fun, let's look at these contrasts between the end of the book of **Judges** and the book of **Ruth**:

Judges 19-21	Ruth
Spiritual darkness	Spiritual light
Gross immorality	Uplifting purity
Pursuing idols who are no gods	Deciding for the One true God

Disloyalty to a tribe	Devotion to a tribe
Lust	Love
War	Peace
Cruelty	Kindness
Desert of rebellion	Oasis of righteousness
Faithlessness of the “chosen people”	Faithfulness of a Gentile alien
Disobedience brings sorrow	Obedience brings blessing

As we prepare to study this portion of God’s Word, it would be good for us to consider three obvious purposes for God’s inclusion of the book of **Ruth** in His sacred Scriptures.

The first is to counterbalance the spiritual fall and darkness of the nation with the beauty of the righteous remnant that remained. In **Judges** we saw how a whole nation turned its back on God. But in **Ruth**, we see that even within that nation that denied any absolute truths and had relegated God to the sideline, those individuals who continued to seek after God and obey His Word, even though others were questioning the relevance of Yahweh or His Word, were blessed.

A second reason that God gave us this little book is to give hope to individuals during dark times, helping them realize that God has not abandoned them.

The third reason is that this book explains the providential ancestry of David, Israel’s first righteous king, and then through David the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the ultimate Redeemer and Savior of all who put their trust in Him.

As we work our way through the study of **Ruth**, there are three points to keep in mind.

As to the date of the writing of the book, we find David mentioned (**4:17**) and his genealogy (**4:18-22**), which places the writing of the book after David’s accession to the throne. As to the author, we really have no idea. Some have suggested Samuel, but he died before David actually became king.

The book of **Ruth** is the classic love story of the Bible, set in the backdrop of a simple rural community and domestic life. Few stories in the Bible are told

from a woman's viewpoint, but in this story not only is a woman the protagonist, but the world of the story is a woman's world, and the writer gives attention to feminine values and feelings. Of course, the only male main character, Boaz, in his role as kinsman-redeemer, cuts a striking figure as a man who embodies the Lord's own kindness. He is a type of Jesus. The story overall exalts virtuous womanhood and strong manhood in contrast to a society that embraced the devaluation of women and raised up men who were cowardly beasts.

As we move through this wonderful book, you will see that each chapter serves as a single act in a four-act play. This is a quick overview of the book.

Act 1	Chapter 1	A Crisis: Famine
Act 2	Chapter 2	An Opportunity: Field
Act 3	Chapter 3	A Prospect: Floor
Act 4	Chapter 4	A Redeemer: Family

It will probably take us two messages to cover each chapter, so our study of Ruth should last no longer than eight messages, but we will see. 😊

In the first act, we read about tragic events that climax at the end of the chapter, with the heroine Naomi's return to her hometown of Bethlehem destitute, after being bereft of her husband and two sons. At the end of the chapter, she woefully declares to her women friends that God has turned against her.<sup>1</sup> But that is getting ahead of ourselves. Let's begin our study by looking at the first five verses, which detail the nature of the crisis that brought about the calamitous events from which Naomi and her daughter-in-law are the sole survivors. Follow along in your Bibles as I read:

**<sup>1</sup>Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons.**

**<sup>2</sup>The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife,**

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<sup>1</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 622–623). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there.

<sup>3</sup>Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.



A crisis, a famine in Judah, forced Naomi and her husband along with their two unmarried sons to abandon their Bethlehem home and the nation Israel and move to Moab.

The magnitude of the disaster of their move is highlighted in **verse 1** with a man along with his wife and two sons. It concludes with a woman with no husband and no sons (**1:5a**). What began as a family has ended in childless widowhood.

To fully grasp the challenges this family faced and to better understand what led to their decision to move, it helps to get a grip on what village life was like for many centuries in the hill country of Canaan. The village people typically engaged in family farming in fields located around the houses that made up a town. They cultivated hardy grains, ones that could be adequately watered by spring rains and maintained with modest irrigation. The raising and selling of domesticated animals, mostly sheep and goats, in addition to the grain fields, olive trees, and grapevines are what made it possible for these folks to live.

The village's size and life was directly dependent upon the availability of water. As rainfall varies according to the season, the older children of the village often took their herds some distance away in search of adequate pasture. A brief dry spell might reduce available local water, forcing some village families to temporarily move in order to survive. A prolonged drought might even dry up the village well, forcing abandonment of the village, only to be resettled when water again became available, perhaps decades or even centuries later.<sup>2</sup>

Typically in the Old Testament, the words, "There was a famine in the land," immediately signals "danger ahead" in the narrative. (**Ruth 1:1; Genesis 12:10; 26:1; 42:5; 2 Samuel 21:1; 1 Kings 18:2; 2 Kings 6:25**) Narratives about famine tell of the unspeakable horror that families like Abraham and Isaac experienced, being driven from home to become refugees in the foreign land of Egypt. Both Abraham and Isaac obtained food for their families, but neither expected a friendly or gracious reception in a foreign land. In fact, both men endangered their wives in an attempt to insure their own safety. Isaac's son Jacob faced a famine and tried to negotiate for food from Egypt, using his sons as messengers. He did obtain food, but in so doing he endangered the lives of all his sons, especially the youngest.<sup>3</sup>

It is easy for those with enough food to criticize the actions of those driven by hunger. But desperate times require desperate measures. The hungry sometimes steal food for themselves and their family, at the expense of being put in jail, or being put to death, or the putting to death of former friends. One writer put it this way:

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<sup>2</sup> Roop, E. F. (2002). *Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (p. 28). Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.

<sup>3</sup> Roop, E. F. (2002). *Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (pp. 30–31). Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.

When people are on the edge of starvation, they may appear as wild animals until hunger robs them of all energy. Then emptiness replaces the fury in their eyes. Every age has witnessed the desperation that drives the hungry from place to place and leaves a family with few survivors.<sup>4</sup>

In our country, there are some who are legitimately hungry, but not like those living in Bethlehem during the period we are reading about.

The irony of the present crisis in Bethlehem is apparent. The name, Bethlehem means “house of or granary of bread.” However, this household in Bethlehem had no food and no hope of growing any additional food upon which to continue on living.

As mentioned before as having been described in the last three chapters of **Judges**, Bethlehem was the Sodom and Gomorrah of its day. But in contrast to Bethlehem, the reader must see the overwhelmingly negative image that the land of Moab raised in the mind of the average Hebrew who first read these words. None of the Biblical stories about Moab are positive. From its inception, according to **Genesis 19:36-37**, Moab was born as a child of incest. In all of the stories of Moab, from Israel’s Exodus from Egypt to this point in time, the Hebrews berate Moab as a perverse and pagan country, governed by foolish and fat rulers. Hence, in the minds of the early listeners of this story, their instinctive interpretation of this family’s flight from Bethlehem to Moab would be one of shame, which would only compound Naomi’s anguish when she was forced to return home as a childless widow.

In addition, it is important to understand the Biblical view of the cause of this famine as clearly being a judgmental act of God. According to **Leviticus 26:18-20** and **Deuteronomy 28:23-24**, God states as part of His covenant curses that if Yahweh’s people go after other gods and persist in rebelling against their covenant LORD, God would respond not only by sending in

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<sup>4</sup> Roop, E. F. (2002). *Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (p. 31). Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

enemies to destroy their crops and occupy the land (as took place in the Book of **Judges**), but also by cutting off the rains and sending famine.

Having said all of this, the writer of Ruth does not tell us how to interpret the move. Was it an act of faith or unbelief? In **verse 2**, the writer's choice of the verb "**to sojourn**" suggests that Elimelech intended to wait out the famine in Moab and then return home. Naomi had little choice but to go with her husband. Whether willingly without objection or with objection (we don't know), she went and later clearly regretted and mourned the loss she suffered as a result of the move.

So, what was the land of Moab like in those days? According to the Hebrew word used for "**land**" in **verse 1**, it refers to a field that has been wrested from an original wild state and brought under human occupation and cultivation.<sup>5</sup> Specifically it may refer to unoccupied territory, in contrast to an inhabited land. It points more to the region surrounding a city, as compared to being a land inside of a walled town.

Even from pictures we can find on the internet, we can see that it is a harsh land that had very few rivers. But there is one river, the Arnon, the likes of which is nowhere near Bethlehem. Hence, if Bethlehem was facing a famine, Moab may not have been. With a lot of work, the land of Moab could produce food.

I imagine that Naomi's family left Israel (something hard to do), because they had great expectations of what they would find in Moab. It must have promised a good life, albeit it would probably be only until they received news that the famine was over and they could return home.

How different from the dream were the experiences of this Israelite family in Moab! They went from fighting the agent of famine in Israel, and walked right into the clutches of the agent of death in Moab. As I understand it, first Naomi's husband died, apparently shortly after arriving. We know nothing as to whether he had lived long enough to develop land to grow food, but apparently the boys were able to marry and continue to live there, taking care of their mother for ten years.

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<sup>5</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 626). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

In Middle Eastern culture, widows living in a foreign land had no community to look out for them; only their immediate family. Furthermore, it was the objective of a woman to leave a remnant of children behind when she died. The fear and sign of failure in that culture for any married woman was to be without children to care for her in her old age, presuming her husband would die before her or one day be unable to provide for them. Hence, Naomi's job was to provide the family with children. But then, suddenly, her married sons died. She had no children or grandchildren to care for her. At this stage in life, she had no hope of ever having her own children, or possessing children through her own sons. Ten to fifteen years after her life in Bethlehem, she had nothing to show for her life's work. She was vulnerable, exposed, a widow indeed, with no one to help, and far from home.

The Hebrew word used twice to describe Naomi's condition after her husband and sons died, that she was "**left**" and "**bereft**" often speak of bereavement at the death of another and often refers to those who have survived the wrath and judgment of God. This explains Naomi's attitude, focus, and her words at the end of this chapter.<sup>6</sup>

When suddenly a major catastrophic event rocks your world, when bad things happen, when you think things just can't get any worse and they do, you might think that God has abandoned you, betrayed you, rejected you, forgotten you, or played a dirty trick on you. I wonder if those same thoughts did not pass through Naomi's mind. Sometimes when we hear of others having difficult times, we think, "Man, God must be out for that person or against that person." But is that true?

You may be unemployed, terminally ill, have a disabled child, or care for a loved one with Alzheimer's. If so, you have to recognize certain facts about God and his treatment of you. In this life, God hasn't promised to keep us from such problems. Rather, sometimes God's sovereignty, wisdom, and kindness is often disguised in hard circumstances. This is a hard fact to face, but Naomi was forced to. Although, it was immensely difficult at that moment in her life, by the end of the book, Naomi would see this.

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<sup>6</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 627–628). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

But at this point, Naomi did not know that. Her faith had been rocked. The only thing she could do was repent, change her mind about living in Moab, turn back toward Israel, go home to face the music, and seek the face of the God of her fathers, with the hope that she would receive mercy from Him.

At this moment, her heart believed that God was against her. He was punishing her, and thus there would be no hope for a better future. This is a common deception of the enemy. But God has proven that He is always “for us” as Christians by what He did through Jesus as declared in **Romans 5:8-9**. We read, “**But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.**” Again, we are told in **Romans** that nothing, not even death, “**can separate us from His love.**” **Hebrews 12:5-6** tells us that the Lord is never “**against us,**” not even when He disciplines us. Hence, Paul concluded in **Romans 8:31**, “**If God is for us, who can be against us?**”

But as she moved on with her life, she came to grips with the reality that nothing would return her husband or sons from the dead, but God would write a new blessed chapter, using her hardships to set the stage for being united with her earthly family redeemer and his new wife, Boaz and Naomi. And, because of her efforts in caring for Ruth, Israel’s Messiah would be born through Boaz and Ruth’s union. This reality instructs us readers of this book that God brings blessings out of hardships.

No matter how dark society is around us, how twisted and immoral our political climate becomes, or even if the local church turns away from the Lord, the individual’s choice to seek the Lord is what counts. We can always swim upstream from the flow of culture and circumstances if we keep our eyes on Jesus and His promises.

This five-verse chronicle of the life of a Bethlehemite family reminds us that troubles can strike without warning or explanation in any time or place.

- Famine finds victims in every age.
- Drought claims countless men, women, and children more frequently in lands.
- Diseases ravage the lives of the young and old.

- Wars render the innocent suddenly homeless and refugees in a foreign land.
- Poverty among the dispossessed still pushes the widow, the orphan, and the elderly out to the edge of society, even if the threat of starvation may be less acute than in the past.

But with Jesus and His faithful followers personally and sacrificially getting down in the dirt to come alongside those who are struggling, there is hope.

In my own recent bout with cancer, I had no idea what the outcome would be. But what I did know and rested in was that my sovereign God was in control, that Jesus had not abandoned me, and that He would walk with me through this trial until one day I would see Him face to face. Hence, I was at peace with the whole situation. But the question came forcefully to my mind, “Where would I be as it concerns peace and calm with the calamity of cancer without Christ if I didn’t know the above?” He is our refuge.

Regardless of your age, you will face challenging times. It is a part of life. What would you do without Jesus? More importantly, what would your friends, neighbors, and family do, if they did not have Jesus as their refuge and strength? That’s where we need to be proactive in reaching out to them with the good news of Christ. Invite those friends around you who know no refuge to meet the One who brings you peace. If that is difficult, then at least invite them to church where they will hear the gospel and hopefully trust Christ.

