

From Bitter to Sweet—the Story of Ruth
Count your blessings!
Ruth 1:1-22
November 16th 2025 MHC & MPC
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At the age of 19 I left Wolverhampton to study in Liverpool. In the first few days, was it a Monday or a Tuesday?, the thought came into my head (not from heaven), “You can live as you please, your parents, your friends, church folks, will never know!”

But when Sunday morning came I heard another voice.

One of the great privileges of growing up in a Christian home is the ingrained habit of gathering with God’s people on the Lord’s Day, the habit of morning worship, which, by the way, occupies just over 1% of a week’s time.

We were taught that the joy and privilege of meeting with God’s people is what Sundays were for—not for sport or leisure, or what did the Beatles sing in their song “When I’m 64”?

*“You can knit a sweater by the fireside,
 Sunday mornings, go for a ride”*

That first Sunday morning, the voice of habit kicked in and on auto-pilot I went to meet with God’s people. And the Scriptures came alive to that 19 year old young man. The Lord used the power of a spiritual “habit” together with “being away from home” + “the church” I joined—all combined—to light a spiritual fire in my soul.

I was a true believer, already, but for the first time in my Christian life I began to take the Bible seriously. Scripture became “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (119:105) I “delighted in God’s Word.” (119:16).

One of my abiding memories was discovering how interesting the Bible was! A compendium of 66 different books, ranging from poetry to narrative, history to letters, law to apocalypse! Anyone who says “the Bible is boring” cannot have read it!

We’ve been making our way through a New Testament letter, Sunday mornings, Paul’s letter to the Romans, and we’ve arrived at chapter 9. Chapters 9-11 are a brand new section of teaching, about the sovereignty of God, about Israel and the church. But because we have only three more Sunday mornings before Christmas sermons begins, we’re taking a break from Romans—to preach from a very different kind of book in the Bible, from Ruth, for three Sundays. Romans is intense, doctrinal, deep and sometimes difficult; Ruth by contrast is personal, homely, a story, sometimes heart-breaking, always easy to understand. Today we’re in chapter 1.

The Story

The story of Ruth takes place around 1300 BC, *“in the days when the judges ruled”* reads the first verse. You may recall that when the people of God finally arrived in the promised land the twelve tribes, Asher, Simeon, Judah, and so on, settled in the land.

The book of Judges tells the next part of the story. Israel wasn't yet ruled by kings such as David or Solomon, but by local Judges, like Gideon and Samson. The last verse of the book of Judges reads: *“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”* The story of Ruth takes place in these wild days and begins with a famine in Bethlehem. That in itself is an irony because Bethlehem means “House of Bread!” Famine in the Old Testament was connected to the sinful behaviour of God's people: *“...if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you: Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed.” (Deuteronomy 28)*

The book of Ruth homes in on one Bethlehem family caught up in this famine, there was Dad Elimelech, Mom Naomi and two young sons Mahlon and Kilion.

One day, in the middle of the famine, Dad Elimelech made the foundational decision, from which everything else that happens in the book flows, to leave Bethlehem because of the famine—and move to Moab to find food.

Hebrew story-telling in the Old Testament often leaves the reader to weigh up whether someone has made a right or wrong decision. It's one way the Lord teaches us wisdom. Was Elimelech, whose name means “God is King” right or wrong to leave Bethlehem?

On the one hand, we can understand Elimelech's desire to feed his family—dad is taking his responsibility to look after his family seriously. But on the other hand, there are some factors that indicate that even if the motive was sound the decision was flawed. A believer can make a wrong decision without evil motives in their heart.

But there are a number of factors which indicate that Elimelech is here making a mistake:

- 1) *Elimelech put his family in spiritual peril.* There would be no believers around them, anywhere! Moab was a pagan nation—enemies of God's people! The move may solve his material needs but it placed his family in spiritual peril. What is particularly puzzling is the fact that on the way to Moab they would have had to pass through the lands of two tribes of God's people. Why not seek help from God's people?
- 2) *Elimelech does not seem to have thought about the future.* He may have reasoned “this is only for a few months” but we all know we cannot predict the future, in the end the family would stay for 10 years, and here' the future point, during that time his sons came of marriageable age and without believers around were forced to marry local Moabite women.

3) *Elimelech did not trust in God's ability to provide for his family.* This is the land God called his people to, the land he provided for them. Many if not most of the folks who lived in Bethlehem stayed where they were and survived the famine—we know that because they were there and recognised Naomi when she returned ten years later. Someone described Elimelech's decision as *"the triumph of pragmatism over faith"*. "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." (Psalm 37)

Elimelech's decision is surely at least questionable. I do not see any evidence that suggests he was not a believer, his very name means "God is king"..... but Elimelech serves as a warning for us, to make sure we bathe our decision-making in prayer and godly counsel.

The tragic consequences

In Moab, tragedy struck the family, *"Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died and she was left with her two sons."* (v3)

And then more sorrow, *"The two sons married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth."* (v.4)

And yet more sorrow: *"After they had lived there (Moab) about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband."* (v5)

By the end of ten years in Moab we have *three graves and three widows.*

Being a foreigner, Naomi herself would have no rights, so the three widows are vulnerable, not only because they have no men to protect them but because the senior member of the householder is an outsider. This is unquestionably the low point of Naomi's life and we catch glimpses of the deep sorrow in her heart:

She wants to change her name to "bitter" "don't call me Naomi, she told them, Call me Mara because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full (husband and two children), but the Lord has brought me back empty"

She blames God for her losses "The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." (v.21)

She has aged and looks so different—and perhaps talks so different - that the ladies who knew and loved her a decade ago, scarcely recognise her, "When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed "Can this be Naomi?" (19)

God's shoulders are broad. He bears patiently the bitterest cries of his children.

You and I may not suffer the same degree of tragedy as Naomi did, though some may; but all God's people will suffer in some way, because we live in a world cursed by the fall.

And when we do, Ruth chapter 1 provides three rays of comfort for God's suffering people:

Three rays of hope for God's suffering people

(1) Remember that the Lord always cares for us

In her hour of deepest anguish good news - out of the blue: *"...Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them (food back in Bethlehem!!) ... Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there"* (6)

The Lord cares for Naomi. He has always loved and cared for her. And so it is with us. There is never a moment when God does not care for his people, what does God say in his Word?

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5)

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.." (Psalm 23)

Let us remember that in the midst of trying times. God continues to care for us. To help us comprehend that, number two, let us learn to...

(2) Count our blessings!

Naomi's life was filled with blessings, in spite of her losses, which perhaps she could not see?

1) *She was alive!* Life is a precious gift! She had found enough food to keep her alive.

2) *She had some family: two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, who clearly loved her!* She might have ended up on her own in a foreign land, but no, she had two daughters-in-law and that gave her companionship and even some protection because they were Moabites!

3) *Naomi had maintained an upright character in the face of trial*, because as she was heading home she freed up her two daughters-in-law. A selfish woman would have encouraged their company on the dangerous journey home, but no, Naomi, 3 times insisted they stay. It was a tearful test for them all, but it revealed Naomi's underlying selflessness. She was more concerned for *their* future well-being than *her own* comfort & security!

4) *Ruth had been converted!* Ruth, her pagan Moabite daughter in law had come to faith in the living God! *"Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."* (17-17)

It's a remarkable statement of faith in God—and more blessing, this converted daughter-in-law insists on travelling back to Bethlehem with her! Naomi is going to have spiritual fellowship all the way home!

5) She still trusted in God! She hadn't walked out!

How do we know? Naomi prays for her daughters in law, "May the Lord show kindness to you" verse 8, and frames all of her sorrows in terms of God's sovereign actions: *"The Almighty has made my life very bitter... the Lord has brought me back empty... the Lord has afflicted me.. the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."*

This may be doubt speaking, but it's not unbelief! Naomi is still a believer!

So many blessings!

Whatever our lot, God is *always* good. "goodness and love follow us all the days of my life." Sometimes we have to sit down and list those blessings!

*When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

(3) Trust God for the future

When God's people are in distress, they ought to (1) remember that God has promised to always cares for them, (2) they ought to count their blessings, and (3) they should trust God for the future.

Naomi does not know the wonderful things God has in store for her! But we do! If only she knew when she left Moab the marvellous things God had in store for her:

- They'd arrive *at harvest time!*
- Ruth would find herself *gleaning in the field of Boaz who she'd end up marrying*
- Naomi would have a *grandson Obed*—whom she loved and looked after so much that the women said "Naomi has a son!"
- And most important of all, something Naomi would never know, something that stretched way way into the future, that little baby boy, Obed., would be an *ancestor of the Messiah*,

Suffering is never the last chapter; God has good things in store for his people. He's waiting for us to trust him fully: *"What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived" the things God has prepared for those who love him " (2 Corinthians 1:9)*

"Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37)

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3)

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? “ (Romans 8)

May the Lord assure us of his care, may we learn to count our many blessings and may we put all our trust in him for the future.