RUTH 1

Hope Lost

Big Idea: Suffering may obscure, but never extinguish God's steadfast love.

Joni Eareckson Tada was paralyzed at seventeen. Her whole life seemed to be ahead of her, and suddenly everything changed. She became depressed and despairing. Where was God's goodness in all of this? At that moment, everything seemed to be against her.

Do you ever feel that way? You can relate to a woman named Naomi, whom we meet in Ruth 1. Her suffering is so great that she struggles to see God's goodness.

Read Ruth 1:1–22.

We are beginning a brief study of a beautiful Old Testament book that will prepare us for Advent next month. When people think of Ruth, they often think primarily of the heroine and miss some of the larger things happening in the book. There are three main characters:

- **Naomi**, Ruth's mother-in-law, who has experienced incredible suffering.
- **Ruth**, a Gentile woman whom God blesses.
- **Boaz**, a Christ-like man whom God uses to show lovingkindness to Ruth and Naomi.

A Few Questions to Help Us Approach the Book

Who wrote it?

We do not know who wrote Ruth. We do know that it was written after David became king, because David is mentioned at the end of the book. The author may have been a priest or scribe, and the book was probably written around 1,000 BC.

What is its context?

Covenantal context. All of Scripture centers on Christ, but where we are in Scripture helps us understand how we are looking for Him. The Old Testament looks forward to Christ's coming. The New Testament looks back at His incarnation—His first coming—and forward to His second coming. Ruth is squarely in the Old Testament, looking forward to Christ's coming.

On the surface, Ruth is a dramatic love story, but it is much more than that. As we dig into the book, we learn about God's nature in relation to our suffering and His goodness in rescuing us from the depths of despair and hopelessness.

Historical context. Verse 1 tells us that the events took place "when the judges ruled." We have just spent seven months studying that book. Remember how bleak it was at times? Everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes. It was a dark and discouraging period.

That is the setting of Ruth. But instead of seeing one depressing failure after another, we see God's redemption plan advancing and His faithfulness on display. It is not that God's faithfulness was absent in Judges, but there we often felt as though we were spinning our wheels, stuck in a cycle of sin and salvation that seemed impossible to escape. By the end of Ruth, we catch a glimpse of someone who typifies Christ, and we see the stage being set for the rise of a righteous king who will rescue Israel.

What is its theme?

Ruth is about hope rooted in God's faithful lovingkindness. It is an Old Testament picture of the truth of Romans 8:28: God works all things together for good for those who love Him.

Theme: God's redeeming grace brings hope out of despair.

If we were to summarize Ruth in one sentence, it would be this:

> *Ruth is about a redeemer from Bethlehem who rescued a cursed bride, sacrificing Himself to give her an inheritance and a future.*

But before we get there, we have to face the harsh realities of how this book begins. Before we can get to a redeemer, we need to understand who the bride is, why she needed to be rescued, and why she was cursed. Before hope can dawn, we need to understand how hope was lost.

In Ruth 1, we see three movements:

I. A Desperate Sojourn (vv. 1–2)

The story opens with a man named Elimelech from Bethlehem. Our ears should perk up when we hear Bethlehem in the Old Testament; we will see why as we progress. Bethlehem means "house of bread," but there is no bread there now. There is a famine.

Given Israel's spiritual condition during the days of the judges, we should not be surprised to find famine in the land. God had warned Israel in Deuteronomy 28 that covenant unfaithfulness would bring agricultural devastation and famine. We do not know whether this particular famine was an act of covenant judgment, but we do know that it occurred during a spiritually dark period in Israel's history.

Elimelech makes a desperate decision: he leaves Israel and God's covenant people for the neighboring country of Moab. He takes his wife, Naomi, and their two sons with him. (Map)

Was that decision right or wrong? The author does not tell us. His family needed food. But the move did take him into a pagan country and away from God's people.

Elimelech intends to be gone only for a short time—a sojourn—but the stay becomes much longer. Then something happens that changes everything.

II. A Decade of Disaster (vv. 3–5)

Elimelech dies. The focus shifts to Naomi, now a widow in a foreign country with two sons. For whatever reason, she does not return to Israel. Her two sons marry two foreign women, Orpah and Ruth, both Moabites.

The Moabites were pagans who worshiped Chemosh, a false god to whom some even sacrificed their children. Marrying a Moabite was not explicitly forbidden by the Law in the same way that marrying a Canaanite was. Nevertheless, Moabites stood outside Israel's covenant community. Deuteronomy 23 specifically excluded them from the assembly of the Lord because of their hostility toward Israel. Ruth came from a people who stood outside the covenant blessings of Israel. That makes what happens in this book particularly remarkable.

At this point, however, Naomi, her sons, and her daughters-in-law remain in Moab for a decade. You might think Naomi has had her fair share of suffering and that things are about to get better:

- She was driven from home by a famine.
- She was widowed in a foreign country.

- Her sons married pagan wives.

But it does not get better. It gets much worse. Both of Naomi's sons die while they are in Moab.

Imagine the situation: her husband is dead, her sons are dead, and she is living as a widow in a foreign country. Now there are two more widows in the household. Three widows.

It is difficult to overstate how disastrous this was. Widows had a hard enough time providing for themselves among their own people, but Naomi was not home. Women were dependent on their husbands for provision and protection, and now all three women had no husbands.

For Naomi, there is no other way to put it: she is destitute and hopeless, grieving her husband and sons far from home. How would you handle this? What would this do to your view of God? For Naomi, it leads to a depressing return.

III. A Depressing Return (vv. 6–22)

As I have lived in this chapter recently, I have been struck again and again by the depth of Naomi's suffering and how hopeless her situation seems. I kept wanting to move on to what happens next. But it was good to sit in her anguish and heartache for a while. Ruth is about hope, but hope does not become truly glorious to us until we understand the despair that often precedes it. It was good to consider Naomi's lament and learn from her response to hardship.

These three widows have to decide what comes next. Naomi has heard that the Lord has visited His people again and that food is available back home (v. 6). So she sets out for Judah, and her daughters-in-law begin the journey with her.

The two Moabite women are now heading toward Israel, where they will be widows in a foreign land. Naomi does not want this. She knows it will be difficult for two Moabite widows to find husbands in Judah. So she urges them to return to their mothers' homes and prays that the Lord will bless them with new husbands.

a. There Is Remarkable Loyalty

The two daughters-in-law protest: "No, we will go with you" (v. 10). But Naomi insists that this will not work. Does she have other sons on the way? Even if she were to become pregnant now, would they wait until those sons were old enough to marry them (vv. 10–13)?

It is a heartbreaking scene. You know Naomi is about to take another blow. Her entire family will be gone. Orpah eventually leaves (v. 14). We should not blame or shame her. Given the circumstances, returning to her family was probably a reasonable decision.

But here is the first glimmer of hope: Orpah leaves, but Ruth does not. Naomi urges Ruth to follow Orpah back to her people and her gods (v. 15). Look at Ruth's beautiful response (vv. 16–17):

> *I will not leave you. I will go where you go and lodge where you lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. I will die where you die. May the Lord judge me if anything but death separates me from you.*

This is beautiful on its face, but consider what they were facing. We often hear these words at weddings, but here they are not spoken as an expression of loyal love between husband and wife. They are spoken by a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law who has nothing to offer her.

Ruth does not make this commitment with good times on the horizon. She makes it in the middle of heartache and hardship, when the outlook is bleak. What is most beautiful here is that Ruth has chosen to believe in Naomi's God, despite the incredible hardship Naomi has experienced. Ruth is essentially saying that she wants to become part of

God’s covenant people.

This is the first good news Naomi has had in a while. Ruth is staying with her. Surely Naomi’s heart swells with gratitude and a glimmer of hope. Well, not really. Why not?

b. There Is a Distorted View of God

This is raw, and it is real. Think about Naomi’s incredible suffering. How would you view God after all of that? Would you think He had abandoned you? Would you begin to doubt His goodness? That is where Naomi is.

1. **She thought, “God is against me.”**

In verse 13, Naomi says, “It is exceedingly bitter for me that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.” This is active language: she believes the Lord has intentionally gone out against her.

When they arrive back in Bethlehem, her friends are shocked to see her. “Is this Naomi?” (v. 19). Her response is essentially, “No—do not call me that. Change my name to Mara, which means bitter.” She says that the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with her, that she went away full and the Lord has brought her back empty, and that the Lord has brought calamity upon her (vv. 20–21).

Naomi is fighting a battle that we often face in suffering: she sees every bad thing as some kind of judgment from God. I understand the impulse. When something bad happens, where does your mind go first? What did I do? Is God angry with me? Is my car broken down because I did not read my Bible yesterday? Do I have cancer because I have been struggling to overcome anger? Did my husband die because God is mad at me?

This is not a healthy view of God, but more of us think like Naomi than we would like to admit.

There are several ways to understand suffering in the life of a believer:

- God sometimes leads us into suffering. First Peter 1 speaks of trials that test our faith and demonstrate its genuineness.
- Some things happen because we live in a sin-cursed world. Bad things happen. They are never outside God’s control, but they are always moving toward our good and God’s glory.
- When we live in unrepentant sin, God sometimes disciplines us. But He does so as a loving Father, with the goal of producing righteousness in us.

We do not know which of these purposes God was working out in Naomi’s life. But we do know this: for the redeemed child of God, these purposes of suffering are never outside His sovereign control, and they never come from malice or ill will.

Romans 8:28 tells us that God works all things for our good. Ultimately, that good is our being made like Christ. Verse 29 says that those whom God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. The ultimate good is not necessarily relief from our circumstances. It is conformity to the image of Christ.

God is not acting out of anger toward His children. He is working out a plan for our lives that ends with us becoming more like Christ and knowing His lovingkindness—the love that holds us through both good times and bad.

Naomi needed someone to come alongside her and gently encourage her to adjust her perspective. How can we do that? One commentary puts it this way:

> *“In the throes of traumatic suffering, sometimes we believers interpret our affliction as evidence of divine disfavor, as does Naomi. But believers in every age must wage war on such suffering-induced skepticism and, rather than letting our circumstances interpret God, let God’s Word interpret our circumstances.”*

How often do we let our circumstances determine our view of God? Bad things happen, and we doubt His goodness, His patience, His steadfast love, and His lovingkindness. We believe God will bless others but not us. Notice that in verse 8 Naomi believes the Lord can show kindness to Orpah and Ruth, even as she sees Him as being against her.

We must be people of the Book. The truth about God is not rooted in our feelings about Him, which are shaped by our circumstances. It is rooted in what Scripture reveals to us.

This we know: throughout Scripture, the Lord promises to show steadfast love to suffering believers, including those who feel forgotten and abandoned in this fallen world.

Psalm 13 gives us a pattern to consider. Lament, yes. Be real and raw. Ask hard questions. But you have to get to the “but” in verse 5. David writes while his world is crumbling around him, yet he chooses to view his hardship through the lens of God’s steadfast love. He remembers the ways God has dealt bountifully with him and blessed him.

Naomi’s perspective could have been different. Instead of concluding, “God is against me,” she should have seen that God had blessed her.

2. She should have seen, “God has blessed me.”

Really? Did you see all the bad things that happened to her? This was a disastrous decade. She was left hopeless and in despair. That is true. But this is how allowing our circumstances to interpret God can distort our perspective: we tend to obsess over what is bad.

Naomi says, “I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty” (v. 21). Was that entirely true? Did we not just hear Ruth’s words in verses 16–17? What an incredible gift Ruth was, and Naomi seems to have missed it.

I am not saying Ruth replaces Naomi’s husband and sons. There is still a great deal of heartache here. But Naomi could not see the evidence of God’s goodness because she was overwhelmed by the evidence of her suffering.

She missed something else, too. What was happening when they arrived in Bethlehem? It was the beginning of the barley harvest. Food was available. As we will see, God provided for widows in Israel through this harvest.

It is so easy to become Eeyore in the middle of hardship. I used to be Tigger, but as I have gotten older, I find more and more Eeyore bubbling up in my heart.

Paul tells believers to give thanks in everything. But how? What if you are facing something incredibly difficult?

I mentioned Joni Eareckson Tada earlier. In the hospital, she was depressed. She had given up and refused to try. She asked, “What on earth do I have to be thankful for?” The answer was to start by looking for small things:

- “Thank You that I can see out of the window.”
- “Thank You that my parents are here.”
- “Thank You that I can move my head, that I can sing.”

She built a pattern of gratitude that changed how she viewed her devastating injury. I listened to her last week. She is now seventy-seven years old. She is still paralyzed and in a wheelchair, and her condition has declined. Yet even in a life marked by suffering, it is clear that she believes God works all things together for good.

God Is Still at Work

I am not here to condemn Naomi. I want to gently urge us not to fall into the pit of despair in which she found herself. She thinks God is finished with her, but He is just beginning to work. She belongs to God’s covenant people, and she is loved by the God of steadfast love.

How much more confidence should we have in His love in the middle of our despair? What comfort it is to know that “He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?”

We do not have to wonder whether God loves us when life becomes difficult. We already know that He does because of the cross.

This truth does not take away the sting of suffering or the losses we face in this life. But it helps us know that our suffering is not empty or meaningless.

Yes, gratitude helps. Remembering His steadfast love helps. Recognizing His blessings helps. But even when we do not do those things perfectly, remember this: God has already demonstrated His faithfulness to us in Christ. His faithfulness does not depend on us getting our perspective exactly right.

Even with Naomi’s distorted view of God, God is still there, loving her with an everlasting love and holding her with His everlasting arms. How much more is this true for those who have been bought by the blood of Christ!

A Word to Those Who Have Not Trusted Christ

It is possible that you are listening to me and have not understood the love of God for sinners. The suffering and heartache in your life may not make sense to you. You may wonder how God could be loving in light of what you have faced.

But He is loving, and He demonstrated that love by coming Himself to save us. He saves us from the sin that separates us from Him, gives life to those who believe, walks with them, and gives them hope now and for eternity.

Have you trusted Him?

Looking Ahead

We began with this summary sentence: Ruth is about a redeemer from Bethlehem who rescues a cursed bride, sacrificing Himself to give her an inheritance and a future. We will see how that unfolds as we move through the book.

But remember this: a Redeemer has come from Bethlehem to rescue a sin-cursed bride by sacrificing Himself to give her an inheritance and a future. That bride is the believers who make up the church. You can be part of that bride if you believe in Christ and trust Him to save you.

Questions for Reflection

Believer, have you allowed suffering and hardship to distort your view of God, a little or a lot? He intends to do you good. Trust in His steadfast love. Allow your heart to rejoice in His salvation. Sing to the Lord, remembering that He has indeed dealt bountifully with you.