

Ruth 1:1-18 - Matthew

I've been preparing for it for a while (I hope it shows), and one of the biggest things that jumped out at me is how I've only really heard this story told as a love story **WHEN THERE'S SO MUCH MORE TO IT!**

Now, I hear some of your thoughts out there--the hopeless romantics who love their Hallmark movies and whatnot. Don't worry, the love story is still part of it. There's just a lot more I wish to point out.

If you've found your place, we'll start reading in verse one, but as we do, REMEMBER, this is a STORY. It's a TRUE STORY, but that's the point, the genre is narrative. We're learning about God through a closeup of the lives of a group of individuals.

To better grasp this, bear in mind that it wasn't recorded until the reign of King David or after. Before that time, it was a story told by the family.

Imagine a child asking his or her parent, "Can you tell me the story again about how grandpa met grandma?"

The storyteller says...

Ruth 1:1-5

1 In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, 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. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 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.

THE END

Now, you know why you're here tonight, and you know there's more to the story, so you're sitting there thinking, "WHOA, WHOA, WHOA! That's not all there is! There's more! And that's the point..."

When we get blindsided by tragedy, from our fixed vantage point in time, that's all we can see, and IT FEELS LIKE THE END, but with the Lord, there's always more to the story.

TRANSITION LINE...

"The truth is, the hardships that make us feel like it's **THE END** actually wind up ushering in a **NEW BEGINNING...**"

And that's what we see in this beautiful story of a woman named Ruth...

The first five verses of the Book of Ruth set the stage for the story, a story that I truly believe was tragedy that God would turn into a blessing...

In fact, it makes me think of the movie **UP**.



Remember that movie?

Do you remember bawling at this scene?



Boy, I do! The movie starts with a lonely old man missing his wife, and Ruth begins with Naomi losing her home to famine and her husband and sons to death in a foreign land.

That's where the story **BEGINS...**

VERSE 1 says that this story takes place during the dark days of the Judges.

In case you're not familiar with the flow of Judges, it was a wearisome cycle of **DISOBEDIENCE**, which led to **BONDAGE** at the hands of another nation. The Nation would fall under such hard times that they would finally cry out to God in **REPENTANCE**, which would lead to His **DELIVERANCE**.

Then the Nation would rebel against God and **REPEAT THE CYCLE** all over again.

It was during this time that Judah experienced famine, prompting Elimelech to **TEMPORARILY RELOCATE** His family. That's what the word "**sojourn**" meant. It was temporary, and only because of the famine.

Now I know some say that Elimelech leaving the land because of famine demonstrated a lack of faith, for which God judged him.

However, **GENESIS 37-50 SETS PRECEDENT** of God sending His people out of the land because of famine, and such an historical precedent could have inspired Elimelech to act as he did, again suggesting this is nothing more than a **TRAGEDY**--life in a sin-broken world.

In **VERSE 2** we learn the names of the family. **Elimelech's name means "My God is King."**

Elimelech's name represents **how Israel was always meant to operate**. They were governed by judges with **no physical king** like the other nations because **GOD WAS TO BE THEIR KING**.

This was the case all the way down through Samuel. It was only after his two rotten sons perverted justice that the nation of Israel demanded a man to rule over them as king. However, **Elimelech's name captures the right sentiment. GOD IS KING.**

The storyteller's emphasis on his name further suggests that **ELIMELECH'S ACTIONS WERE RIGHT**. It's no coincidence that the book begins with someone named "My God is King" and ends with the most famous king of Israel, King David, whose descendant would be the ultimate **FULFILLMENT OF HIS NAME**.

As we study this book, you're going to begin to see many things come **FULL CIRCLE**. Ruth truly is **A STORY OF REDEMPTION**, but I'm jumping ahead...

Ruth 1:2a

The name of the man was Elimelech (meaning "My God is King") **and the name of his wife Naomi** (which means "pleasant"), **and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion** (Mahlon meaning "**to be weak, sick,**" and Chilion coming from the Hebrew word *kalah*, meaning "**to be frail**").

One commentator noted that they were likely given such names because **they struggled in their infancy due to the JUDEAN FAMINE** that led Elimelech to seek provision in Moab.

Ruth 1:2b

They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

And as the scriptures state, they were Ephrathites, meaning that they came from the **SMALL TOWN OF EPHRATH** that, because of its proximity, it was **often identified with the larger Bethlehem** (Genesis 35:16-19).

I think of **WILBAR**. You know Wilbar? It no longer has a post office, but it still has a fire department.

Folks who live in Wilbar don't put that on a return address, though. What do they put? (Millers Creek).

That's right! It's little and obscure, so it's just thought of as Millers Creek.

The same is true of Ephrath. However, you'll recognize that name from the beloved **MICAH PROPHECY** we quote at **CHRISTMASTIME...**

Micah 5:2

**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me**

**one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.**

The events recorded in Ruth are what **give rise to that prophecy!**

So the **FAMILY** has been **DISPLACED** because of **FAMINE**, but that it isn't the end of the family's hardship. Verse three tells us Naomi's **HUSBAND DIES**.

Now the boys haven't married yet. The storyteller says that Naomi "**was left with her two sons,**" not her two sons and their wives.

So, the boys lose their dad in Moab, and then they take wives. It make me think of how **ISAAC COMFORTED WITH A WIFE** after who died? His mother!

Perhaps the **two new wives** served to **comfort the grieving family**.

Now according to Ruth 4, Ruth was Mahlon's wife, which means that Orpah was married to Kilion.

Orpah's name is taken from the **Hebrew noun meaning "the back of the neck"** and the related verb meaning "**to turn back.**"

The name **Ruth** is taken from the **Hebrew noun meaning "FRIENDSHIP."**

TEN YEARS LATER, Mahlon and Kilion **DIE** as well. Naomi's husband is gone, and now, **so are her babies.**

That's what it says in the Hebrew. In the ESV, any reference to the boys is "sons," however, in verse 5, the storyteller switches from "**ben**" for **son** to "**yeled**," which means "**offspring**," **the ones she had birthed**.

Do you see the poignancy of this scene? You parents get this, especially the moms. **It doesn't matter how old your children are, they're still your what? You're BABIES.**

Mahlon and Kilion were grown men with wives, but **they were still Naomi's babies, and now they were gone.**

We've hit bottom.

However, while it may be the bottom, it is **NOT THE END...**

Next comes verse six, which is precious because in it we see the **FIRST MENTION OF THE LORD IN RUTH...**

Ruth 1:6

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.

"The Lord had visited his people and given them food."

Remember how I said that some believe that Elimelech sinned by taking his family to Moab and that God punished him for it?

I think verse six contradicts that because the first thing the storyteller explicitly names the Lord for is **taking note of His people in their low estate and lifting them out of it.**

INCIDENTALLY, THIS IS THE THEME OF THE LORD'S ACTIVITY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH.

The Lord had **REVERSED THE FAMINE**, providing His people with abundance where there was once only lack. This isn't the last "REVERSAL" we'll witness in this book.

Verse 7 says...

Ruth 1:7-9

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.

VERSES 7-14 is a picture of **LEAVING BEHIND THE THINGS THAT HURT**. Naomi had traveled with her family to Moab; that's where she lost them all. Now reports had reached Moab that there was once again food in Judah.

MOAB HAD NOTHING FOR HER, so she left, and she planned to leave the girls too.

This is one way we deal with hardship, isn't it? We seek to remove all reminders of the tragedy in the past. This is what Naomi was doing.

Moab is where she lost it all. She wanted no part of it touching her life.

The storyteller says that **they all headed out together**. Naomi didn't send them away before they started out. However, it seems that this **PARTING WAYS FAREWELL SPEECH** took place early on, and NOT after having traveled a ways.

It makes me wonder, when they were packing up, **DID NAOMI JUST TELL THE GIRLS TO PACK?** Had she already planned to leave them in Moab, but had decided to wait on telling them until **AFTER THEY WERE PACKED?**

The arduous job of packing was certainly made easier by not having to do it with the understanding that they would be parting ways afterward.

We don't like long, painful farewells, do we? Saying goodbye to loved ones is hard, so we often spare ourselves the added heartache by making goodbyes quick. I wouldn't be surprised if that's what Naomi did.

Eventually, Naomi breaks the news, telling them to return to their mothers' houses. The **MOTHER'S HOUSE** was a place of **BRIDAL PREPARATION**.

She was telling them, ***"You should remarry. You can still have families."***

"MAY THE LORD DEAL KINDLY WITH YOU..."

"MAY THE LORD GRANT..."

Twice Naomi asked a blessing of the Lord on her daughters-in-law. Naomi's blessing over them reveals that the girls had **ALREADY TAKEN CARE OF NAOMI**, and **she expected no further commitment**.

The second blessing was on their future families. She prayed that the Lord would give them safety, security, and provision with NEW HUSBANDS and NEW HOMES.

And get this, **THIS WASN'T A TEST!** Orpah and Ruth seemingly wouldn't have been wrongdoing to do as Naomi said. **SHE WAS PUSHING THEM AWAY.**

The finality of what Naomi was saying was palpable. They were to go back to their people, find new husbands, start new families, and more or less **FORGET ABOUT THE LAST 10 YEARS.**

"...Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept" (Ruth 1:9b).

ONE LAST KISS GOODBYE... This was it. Her daughters-in-law were a reminder of the loss she had suffered. So she sent them away.

Think of how old Ruth and Orpah would have been when they were married. The Bible is silent on their ages, but it's generally accepted that the girls would have been teenagers (**probably closer to 12 than 20**). That said, after having been married for 10 YEARS, these women would have been nearing that time point in married life when they had been married for as long as they had been unmarried.

IS IT ANY WONDER THAT THIS MOMENT WAS SO TEARFUL?! Now the woman who for all intents and purposes had become a **second mom** to them was **leaving them alone** and telling them to forget about the last ten years. **In a way, it's as if Naomi was now dying to them too.**

Ruth 1 is all about **LOSS...**

IN HER GRIEF, NAOMI WAS PUSHING THOSE CLOSEST TO HER AWAY.

People grieve in different ways. Some wish to grieve alone. That's Naomi, but we've seen it ourselves too, haven't we?

Maybe you were the one pushing others away; maybe you've been pushed away.

Pay close attention. THIS IS NARRATIVE. **This is God saying, "Learn of Me and My will from these peoples' lives."**

Ruth 1:10

And they said to her, No, we will return with you to your people.

This was too much for the girls to bear. They were still committed to Naomi.

VERSE 11 begins Naomi's bitter tirade. This was getting harder by the moment, so her speech becomes filled with **EXAGGERATION** and **RHETORICAL QUESTIONS** that expect a **negative response**.

Ruth 1:11-13

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? (NO) 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? (NO) Would you therefore refrain from marrying? (NO) No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.

Now Naomi gives them another reason. She tells them that they don't really want to go with her because **THE LORD HIMSELF WAS AGAINST HER**. To stay with her was to invite her affliction into their own lives.

In her grief, **NAOMI HAD BECOME CONVINCED THAT THE LORD HIMSELF WAS AGAINST HER.**

He “**had it out for her.**”

Do you see the **PROGRESSION** Naomi went through? We experience it too...

When things are tough, we can keep going. “Lord, this is hard, but I’m glad You’re with me.”

When they can become **seemingly unbearable, they may cause us to question God.** “Why are You allowing this?” Plenty of people asked that throughout scripture.

When the **BOTTOM DROPS OUT...WE HURT!!!** “WHAT ARE YOU DOING, GOD?! DON’T YOU EVEN CARE?!”

TRAGEDY and **GRIEF** have a way of **CONFUSING** us, and the devil and our flesh are quick to make us think, “**He must not love me anymore. In fact, He must HATE me.**” We can feel like we’re being PUNISHED.

Naomi was there. She was pushing those closest to her away, and now she truly believed that God was against her. **She hasn’t fully crashed, though. That’s coming...**

Ruth 1:14

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

Orpah bowed out after this tirade. To her credit, she had hung in there. Naomi told them to go **three times (verses 8, 11, and 12)**, and the third time it sank in. “**If she wants me to leave, I’ll leave,**” and she kissed her mother-in-law goodbye.

Orpah had finally let Naomi push her away, and who could blame her? I can’t help but wonder if Orpah would have left if Naomi hadn’t been so forceful.

“...but Ruth clung to her.”

Remember how I said **Naomi wasn't done spiraling?** Here it is...

Ruth 1:15

And she said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.

We all know people who have lost loved ones like Naomi and struggled to heal. Perhaps it was a **CHILD** who passed away, maybe a **SIBLING**, or a **PARENT**, or **SPOUSE**.

The loss occurred, and their loved ones never move on. **Life ends (and I mean for the one who's still alive), and nothing is ever good again.** Perhaps you're like that tonight. Perhaps you know someone else who has **shut down and shut everyone out.**

Naomi has reached such a low point that, even though she had JUST ASKED THE LORD TO BLESS RUTH and Orpah (vv. 1:8-9), now she literally urges Ruth to return to the false gods of her people. **The phrase "has gone back to her people and to her gods" says that Ruth and Orpah had been following the LORD!**

Now in the midst of extreme grief, **NAOMI HAS NO CONCERN FOR RUTH'S SPIRITUALITY.**

She's not in her right mind.

Grieving people can be like that. This isn't an indictment against Naomi. **SHE'S BROKEN, AND SHE CAN'T SEE THINGS CLEARLY.**

What did Ruth do??? Did she tell Naomi to **“SNAP OUT OF IT!”** Did she **FLING HER OWN LOSS** in Naomi's face? Remember, Naomi wasn't the only one who lost someone! What did Ruth do?

Ruth 1:16-17

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.

RUTH SHOWS US, even in the midst of her own loss, **HOW TO HANDLE THOSE WHO ARE STRUGGLING IN GRIEF** like Naomi. **WE CAN'T LET THEM PUSH US AWAY.** They can't see things clearly. They aren't acting like they would be if they hadn't taken such a blow.

Ruth tenaciously hangs on in **GRACE** and **LOVE** in spite of Naomi's bitter tirade.

And get this! Ruth was turning down sure blessing (vv. 8-9) for what she knew would be a **VERY HARD ROAD**, because she knew the truth:

Nothing with God in this world is everything, and everything in the world without God is nothing.

Oh, what a beautiful inclusion in scripture! The Book of Ruth is a **BREATH OF FRESH AIR** in our day and in the day it was set.

While Judges depicts the nation of Israel running after the pagan gods of the Gentiles, Ruth shows us **A GENTILE RUNNING TOWARD THE GOD OF ISRAEL.**

Ruth1:18

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

NAOMI LET RUTH IN.

God has made it abundantly clear that **WE'RE NOT MEANT TO BE ALONE**, and one of the reasons we need each other is to comfort one another in times of grief. The scriptures are replete with passages that tell us to **CARRY ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS** and how to go about it.

So, what's our responsibility? What are we to learn about God, ourselves, and life from this moment in Naomi and Ruth's lives?

(Read the rest...)

When the bottom drops out, remember to let others in, and that God is FOR YOU; lean into Him and godly friends and family. **LET THEM IN.**

When we find ourselves on the outside of a tragic situation looking in, let's remember that those caught in the whirlwind of tragedy can't see clearly. They're doing their best to make it. **HANG IN THERE** with them. Even if they don't recognize it, **THEY NEED YOU.**

RUTH REFUSED TO LET GO, AND NAOMI LET HER IN. And so begins the beautiful story of a faithful woman and her faithful God...

This is such a RICH STORY! I hope you'll be back (and bring others!) to hear and learn from the rest of it.