



Introduction to Ruth

Ruth 1:1-5

What Is Ruth About?

The book of Ruth has been recognized as one of the most impressive literary achievements of the Old Testament. Ruth is a favorite story of many, and for good reason. With realistic characters, an exciting plot, and a happy ending thrown in for good measure, Ruth is one of those books that many believers learn well from their childhood. But what is Ruth really about?

An Example of the Virtuous Woman

One way that Ruth can be read is as an example of the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31. Actually, in one of the several different ways the OT is ordered in the Hebrew Bible, Ruth comes right after Proverbs 31. Beyond that, Ruth herself is called a virtuous woman (Ruth 3:11). After describing a woman who works hard and cares for her family being blessed by God, the book of Ruth shows us a real life example of someone doing just that.

Consider having your groups scan through Proverbs 31 for a minute or two and ask them what types of the things the virtuous woman does and how this might remind someone of Ruth.

What kind of a person do Proverbs 31 and the book of Ruth depict the virtuous woman as being? How would they define “virtue”?

An Important Link in the History of God’s Plan

But Ruth is doing more than simply showing us what a godly woman looks like. In our English Bibles, the book of Ruth comes right after Judges and right before 1 Samuel. It plays an important role in between these two books by transitioning from the dark, depressing stories of the end of Judges to set the stage for the rise of David, the king after God’s own heart.

- **Ruth shows God’s hand at work in a dark period.**

As we will see, Ruth is set in a dark period of Israel’s history. The last few chapters of the book of Judges can be a challenge to slog through, but when one comes to Ruth they find a very perspective on God’s people at this time. As one commentator put it: “In contrast to the Book of Judges, where the nation of Israel as a whole and most of the characters are portrayed as thoroughly Canaanized in heart and mind and deed, this story describes an oasis in an ethical wasteland.”¹

How can the book of Ruth help people living in spiritually dark times?

- **Ruth shows the origin of King David.**

The story of God’s redemption of man is a story that begins in Genesis 3:15 with the promise that there will come a descendant (“seed”) of the woman who will crush the serpent. The rest of the story of the Old Testament is the continuing story of where that seed will come from and how God will fulfill His promise through a seed. The story begins when God narrows the seed to Seth, and not Cain. Then God chooses Abraham, then Isaac, Jacob, and finally Judah.

The promise of a coming seed will eventually be confirmed with King David (2 Samuel 7) and with his line. This story is an important link showing God’s providential and guiding hand bringing about what He promised during a very dark time in Israel’s history. God is at work both in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, but at the same time He is doing things that will ripple through the grand stage of history, even though at the time it looked like a simple case of figuring out who would inherit the land of a deceased Israelite.

How aware do you think Ruth and Boaz were of the hugely important role they would play in world history?

What lessons can we glean from this perspective?

A Picture of Christ of Christ and the Church

Finally, many people have noted that Ruth is a book that paints a vivid picture of Christ and His church.

Knowing what you do about the book of Ruth, how might Ruth be a picture of Christ and the church?

¹ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 614.

No doubt many parallels could be brought forward, but here are some of the highlights:

- Ruth is a Gentile outsider who comes to know the favor of God (cf Romans 11).
- Ruth reflects the loyalty of God in a way the church ought to.
- Boaz in many ways functions as a picture of Jesus.
- Boaz meets the needs of Ruth.
- Boaz protects Ruth from danger.
- Boaz redeems Ruth by marrying her.

A Family's Fateful Flight (1:1-5)

Frane Selak has been dubbed “the unluckiest man in the world.” This Croatian man has been closer to death more frequently than anyone else on record. Frane was involved in a train crash where seventeen people died, a plane crash where nineteen people died, a bus accident in which four people died, three separate car incidents that involved an exploding fuel tank on one occasion, petrol that caught fire on another, and a truck crashing into his car as he leaped out just in time, and finally he was knocked down by a bus. Although some of the earlier events are disputed, there’s no question that Frane has had a rough go of it.²

Have you ever felt like Frane? Like nothing is going your way? As we read the opening verses of Ruth, we start reading a story that sounds like Frane. We read of a family that is faced with a problem, responds wrongly, and sees things go from bad to worse. By the end of the first five verses, our main characters are in a pretty sad situation.

The Setting (1:1-2)

How a story begins is important. You might be tempted to skip over the first two verses of this book, but if you did then we would be missing important information! As you read the opening verses of Ruth, ask yourself what kind of story you would be expecting if the first two verses are all you knew.

- **When did the story take place?** *“In the days when the judges ruled”*

What do we know about the period of the judges?

The book of Judges shows a continually downward spiral. Early judges are strong leaders, but cracks begin to be seen and by the end we have Samson, a man who showed faith in God (Hebrews 11:32) but who also slept with the enemy he was tasked to destroy not just once,

² “Luckiest or Unluckiest Man in the World?” Ripley’s. <https://www.ripleys.com/weird-news/unluckiest-man/>
Accessed November 9, 2021.

not just twice, but on three separate occasions. The final refrain throughout the disturbing final chapters of the book is “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Ruth begins by letting us know the story is taking place during this time.

- **What kicks off the action?** *“there was a famine in the land”*

Stories normally begin with background information and then have something called “inciting action.” Inciting action is the moment the story really starts, the thing that kicks the story into motion. In the case of the book of Ruth, it all starts with a famine. This little detail is really important if we think about the broader story of the Bible...

Why do you think there was a famine?

Israel wasn’t supposed to have famines. God had told them that if they obeyed Him, they wouldn’t have famines. If they disobeyed Him, there would be famine as a result (Deuteronomy 28:22-24). The irony here is further emphasized by the name of the city – “Bethlehem” is Hebrew for “house of bread.” This reinforces what we would already have assumed from the reference to the judges... things are not going well in Israel at this time. There are physical problems (a famine), but those physical problems are signs of a deeper spiritual problem with the country.

- **Where does the story take place?** *“A certain man of Bethlehem-judah ... Went to sojourn in the country of Moab”*

Bethlehem-judah is a city that shows up several times in the sordid stories that end the book of Judges. From Levites for sale to the starting point of a fateful journey that would rip apart a nation, Bethlehem-judah is not a place that gives you happy feelings by the end of Judges. Knowing what we know about Christ’s ultimate birth there, it can be tough to go from “O Little Town of Bethlehem” to “Bethlehem? Great, what problems is Israel going to get into now?” But if that wasn’t bad enough, the characters in this story don’t leave Bethlehem for Mount Ephraim, but for somewhere far worse: Moab.

What do we know of Moab from the Old Testament?

Moab was an ancient enemy of Israel. The origins of Moab were the incestuous relationship of Lot and his daughter (Genesis 19:30-38). Next, Moab refused to allow Israel to pass through when they were trying to get to the Promised Land (Numbers 22-24) and then partially succeed in seducing the Israelites to immorality and pagan worship (Numbers 25:1-9). As a result, Moabites were excluded from Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3-6). Finally, the first judge we read about delivering Israel delivered them from a Moabite king (Eglon, cf Judges 3:15-30).

Bethlehem and Moab are very close, only 20-30 miles apart, but there was a bitter hatred between these countries. When we read about an Israelite leaving the land of God because of the discipline of the Lord for their sin, we should be very nervous about where this story is going to end up.

What kind of rationalizations might Elimelech have made to excuse this move? What should Elimelech and his family have done? In what ways might believers today make similar choices as Elimelech?

- **Who is in this story?** *“And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Beth-lehem-judah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.”*

The names in the first few verses of Ruth are ironic:

- We’ve already seen that Bethlehem means “house of bread.”
- Elimelech’s name means “My God is King”
- Naomi’s name means “Lovely,” but later she will change her name from “lovely” to Marah “bitter” by the end of the first chapter.
- Mahlon probably means “sickly” and Chilion probably means “deathly”
- The name Moab means “from Father” and refers to the incestuous relationship that Lot’s daughter engaged in to conceive her son Moab. This sick beginning of the nation foreshadowed a tense relationship with Israel (cf Numbers 22-25; Deuteronomy 23:3-6).

So, putting it altogether: During one of the darkest periods of Israel’s history, “My God is King” fails to trust God his King and ironically abandons the “House of Bread” because of a famine sent as God’s judgment. He takes with him his wife “Lovely” who by the end of the chapter will change her name to “Bitter,” along with their two sons “Sickly” and “Deathly” to go to the land of “From Father,” the ancient nation known for perversity and that had refused to help Israel, all during a time when everyone is doing whatever seems right in their own eyes.

We’re only two verses in and already this does not seem like it’s going to be a good story.

The Opening Scene (1:3-5)

If the first few verses set us up for expecting a bad story, the next two verses would seem to confirm to us that things will not be a happy ending.

- **A Funeral (1:3)**

Elimelech left Israel, the land of God’s promise, because he and his family were trying to escape the judgment of God. He thought it would be easier to simply move to a place where there was blessing, but running from God’s chastening never makes life easier. Instead, we find Elimelech dying almost immediately in the story, leaving Naomi and her two sons behind.

- **Two marriages (1:4)**

Should Mahlon and Chilion have married foreign women?

For Israelites to marry foreign women was a problem, a problem that is addressed multiple times in Scripture (cf Ezra, Nehemiah, Deuteronomy 7:3-4). Marriage to pagans was seen as a judgment by God (Deuteronomy 28:32). The concern was that foreign women would draw the heart of Israelites after other gods. Although a case might be made for allowing proselytes to marry (e.g. Rahab), Naomi still viewed Orpah and Ruth as Moabites when she told Ruth that Orpah had gone back to *her* people and *her* gods (1:15). Naomi didn't see Orpah and Ruth as Israelites, she still saw them as Moabites. This, along with the impending death of Mahlon and Chilion show us that these marriages were probably not the right move and 10 years of barrenness are probably meant to indicate that such marriages were wrong.

- **Two funerals (1:5)**

The lowpoint in the story comes mercifully early, but how devastating it must have been for Naomi. She had lost her husband. She had lost both sons. She was now alone in a strange country with nothing but two foreign women as daughters-in-law. The decision to abandon God's land and God's people had led to death and loneliness. But God is not done with Naomi. In many ways Naomi is the main character of this story, as God begins to melt the heart of this obstinate Israelite and to graciously show His kindness and mercy to her.

Sometimes God must break before He can heal (Hosea 5:13-6:2). God brings Naomi through great pain at the beginning of the story, but He does so out of love and out of an ultimate desire to restore her and her family to a place of usefulness.

Ruth is a fascinating story about love, loyalty, and redemption. But it's a very human story. It's a story of someone who lost everything so that God could build them back. It's the story of a child of God running from their problems and from God, and how God eventually won them back.

What are some ways that people today run from God?

How does God respond when people run from Him?