

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from the one who takes all our worries and anxieties to the Cross, Jesus Christ our Savior, amen.

Today we begin a four-week series on the Book of Ruth. As I normally do when we start our way through a new book, let's look at the background and context before we dive into the theology and story itself. The Book Ruth is named after the daughter-in-law of a woman named Naomi, a Hebrew name meaning "pleasant." Naomi's life is anything but pleasant. She and her husband flee Israel because of a severe famine and wind up in the country of Moab, one of Israel's most hated enemies. She flees death due to famine, but death follows here into the far country. The book's namesake, Ruth in the Hebrew means friendship or just plain friends. It never dawned on me the ancient Hebrew has found its way into our modern language when we say a person who has left all his friends behind to go alone is ruthless...

Most scholars date the book of Ruth to the time after the Israelite peoples returned to Israel after their captivity in Babylon. The opening lines tell us the story is set during the time of the Judges, before Israel had its first king. That would place Ruth sometime between 1400 and 1350 BC. Since the book concludes with the mention of King David, the author must have known about King David. So, it's a fair assumption that the book was written sometime during or after the kingship of David. This is where the current debate over the dating of

Ruth stands today. Scholars are divided over an earlier date of 950 -700 BC while others have determined it was written almost 500 years later or about 500 to 450 BC. In either case it's a story about loyalty and faithfulness. Martin Luther said it was a story given to us to show us that God is the God of all peoples, including a Moabite woman named Ruth. If you can, try to put aside all the things you already know about Ruth and just follow the story line as it comes to us today and the next three Sundays, then you'll see it's a book with a surprise ending! I'm not going to reveal that surprise just yet. You'll have to keep coming back to find out what God is doing in this great epic tale.

For today's installment we find Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion, residents of Bethlehem and scripture says they're also Ephrathites. The name Ephrathites refers to an even more ancient name for the city of Bethlehem, from before Abraham came on the scene and God gave all the Canaanite land to His favorite wandering sojourner. The name Ephrathah means "plenty" and Bethlehem means "House of Bread." So, we start out with a bit of irony. The land formerly known as the Land of Plenty and currently known as the House of Bread is experiencing a great famine, enough that it forced Naomi and her family to travel to the land of Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea and into if not enemy territory, then certainly a country with strained relations with Israel.

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Moab was a land populated by the descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew. Moabites were pagans who worshipped the god Chemosh. Therefore, Ruth, as a Moabite, is an unlikely hero in the overall Jewish story. However, the book that bears her name clearly presents Ruth as a hero. Ruth exhibits several important qualities, valued in the ancient world and in the Bible overall. Ruth is loyal to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth's words of loyalty to Naomi are some of the most famous and most quoted verses of the Bible. When Ruth declares, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!", she is declaring her undying love for Naomi. We will see in the coming weeks if the "Chosen" people of God, the Hebrew People, will follow God's Command to take care of the widows, even a widow from an unfriendly nation... This story is the Old Testament equivalent of the parable Jesus told about the "Good Samaritan." It answers the question who can be counted among the faithful and how far does my obligation to help my neighbor extend. If this book had been composed during the post exile period as many scholars believe, then it would also be a story to help the returning Israelites accept those who had been left behind and who had married foreign wives. If Ruth can find a home and peace among the Jewish nation and

with the Jewish God Yahweh, then maybe the newly returning Jews could also accept and include those who are also outside the bloodline of Abraham.

This is a great epic tale about overcoming adversity and famine, but also about how the people of God respond to tragedy and death. It's a story about loyalty and faithfulness to one another and to the God who, as Job would say gives and takes away. When we look at the Book of Ruth we see three women who have lost everything. Under the laws of Moses, when a man dies the widow's sons are obligated to take in their mother. Similarly, if a man dies and leaves a widow, his brother is obligated to take in the woman and provide for her for the rest of her life. That was the social safety net provided under the law for widows. In the case of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah that safety net was pulled out from under them with the death of all three husbands. In ancient society women had no security, no ability to earn a living on their own. They were entirely, 100 percent dependent on the men they married. It appears to me the Moabite god Chemosh and his followers had no further social safety net to take care of widows since Naomi decided it would be better for her to make the trip back to Bethlehem in Judah rather than to stay in Moab. At least in Judah, again under the laws of Moses, widows and orphans were granted access to the fields and farms to glean the droppings that were left after the harvest. This was actually coded into their laws. Ten percent of the harvest was to be left behind and foreigners, widows, and orphans were allowed to take what they

needed. The law made no provision for housing or any other necessities of life, but at least they would have some food to subsist. That was the life Naomi thought she was returning to in Judah, but at least it would be better than staying in the land where no such protection was provided and the place that held so many painful memories of losing her husband and both of her sons. In a similar situation, I would have done anything to get out of that place! (SLIDE)

In the Air Force we had humanitarian reassignments that could be made when a family suffered such a loss. We would even go so far as to allow the Air Force member to retrain to a different career field in order to get them back to an assignment close to their family of origin or any other place they requested. These assignments were called Humanitarian or Compassionate reassignments. In essence, that's what Naomi chose. She had decided to return to the place of her family of origin. She needed to find some peace and the familiarity of her hometown maybe some friends or her family might remember her and take pity on her. As she returned to Bethlehem, and in dialog with her daughters in law, she reveals just how much the losses have affected her. Upon arriving back in Judah and being recognized by her former neighbors she even changes her name to Mara, a name that means "bitter" in Hebrew.

Naomi has good reason to be bitter. How many of us, when faced with far smaller troubles have made similar claims against God. In school, after spending

my time having fun with my friends instead of studying, I remember asking God why He allowed me to get such a low grade on the exam... I definitely had a huge Blame God attitude after the deaths of my dad and 11 months later the death of my sister Marilyn. It took years for me to realize God didn't cause nor did God want those two beloved people to die at such an early age. God never wills bad things to happen. What I do know is that God accepts our laments and God even loves it when we blame Him for our troubles. God wants to be in relationship with you and me so badly that God will gladly shoulder all our cares, worries, anxieties, and our anger. In return God provides us with peace and the comfort of knowing we are never alone in our sorrow or in our suffering. Quite the opposite is true actually. God lifts us up during our times of grief and gives us the strength to get up one day at a time and carry on. When we do, despite every fiber in our body telling us to roll over and play dead, we're living out our faith and faithfulness toward this God who loves us and who provides the sunshine and the rain.

May we learn to take all our troubles and cares to the God of Naomi. May her God be our God today and every day. May the loyalty demonstrated by Ruth toward Naomi be an example for us to cling to our Church family when it seems like everything is falling apart. Thanks be to God, through His beloved Son Jesus Christ for showing us just how far our Heavenly Father would go to give us the hope for an eternity with God forever and ever, amen.