

Ruth

Lesson 1

Introduction

Theme: Hope, especially when it's difficult to have hope. When catastrophe strikes and there is no logical reason to expect anything good to happen, can we still have hope? If so, what is the source of that hope? Alternatively, when catastrophe strikes, does that mean God is against you? How could you answer that question?

Author: The book does not name an author, and scholars think the style and the evidence from the genealogy in chapter 4 suggest the book was written during Israel's monarchy era (circa 1,000 to 700 BC). But the events of the book take place during the era of the judges (circa 1,360 to 1050 BC), meaning whoever wrote the book was almost certainly preserving a story that had been carefully told and retold verbally for many generations. One popular historical theory posited Samuel as author, but there's no evidence in the book itself pointing to Samuel, and the genealogy at the end suggests an author who lived later and thus could more easily appreciate David's historical and spiritual significance.

Setting: The book is set during the time of the judges. The beginning and end of that time period is uncertain, but conservative scholars often estimate it to be around 1360 to 1050 BC. Taking into account the genealogy in Ruth 4, perhaps a decent time range for this story is 1,250 to 1,150 BC. During this time period, the Israelites lived in the promised land of Canaan, but had no king or central government. Families were by far the most important social unit. As shown by the book of Judges, during this era Israelite society repeatedly passed through a cycle of prosperity, apostasy, disobedience, judgment, repentance, obedience, and prosperity, with the apostasy and disobedience portions of the cycle become progressively intense, dark, and lengthy, and the repentance and obedience portions progressively shallower and shorter.

Scene 1A: A series of unfortunate events (1:1-5)

- *During the time of the judges* – As mentioned above, my best guess is that this story occurs circa 1,250 to 1,150 BC, although the time of the judges lasted from approximately 1,360 to 1050 BC. More importantly, this phrase told the original audience that this story takes place when Israelites lived in the promised land but before they had a king, and social conditions were often dark and dangerous.
- *there was a famine in the land* – During this time period, covenant blessings for obedience included agricultural prosperity. (Deut. 28:2-5.) Conversely, the punishments for covenant disobedience included agricultural failure. (Deut. 28:15-18.) The original Israelite audience would know that the famine might be a divine judgment. (Ex. 2 Sam. 21:1; 24:12-13; 1 Kings 17:1.) The narrator, however, does not declare whether this famine was a divine judgment.
- *A man from Bethlehem in Judah went to live temporarily in Moab* – At this time, Bethlehem was a small town in the territory of Judah approximately 5 miles south of

Jerusalem, although Jerusalem was still under Jebusite control. Moab was located to the southeast of Bethlehem on the other/eastern side of the Dead Sea. As the crow flies, it was probably only 50 miles away. In that time, however, a traveler would have had to walk around the Dead Sea, crossing difficult terrain and the borders with other Israelite tribes and people groups, a dangerous journey. See Judges 19:1-30. Moreover, Moab and the Israelites had a contentious relationship. The Moabites were Lot's descendants, and so the Lord had told the Israelites not to attack them when they journeyed to the promised land. Deut 2:18-19. But because the Moabites tried to curse Israel as they passed through Moab, Moabites were prohibited from entering the tabernacle or temple. Numbers 22:1-24:25; Deut. 23:3-4. Early in the time of the judges, Moab was one of the foreign oppressors the Lord used to punish Israel. (Judges 3:12-30.) Moving from Bethlehem to Moab was a physically dangerous endeavor. Was it a sinful endeavor? There is much debate among commentators. Before the conquest, Abraham and Jacob temporarily left the promised land to escape the effects of famine, but Isaac was told to remain during a famine. Compare Gen. 12:10 (Abraham goes to Egypt temporarily during a famine) and Gen. 45:5-11 (Through Joseph, God directs Jacob and his other sons to go to Egypt during a famine) with Gen. 26:1-3 (God tells Isaac to stay in the promised land during a famine). When the Israelites conquered the land, they were warned not to go back to Egypt, but no other nation was mentioned. Deut. 17:16. It seems fair to describe the move as spiritually risky, but not prohibited by law. The narrator's presentation of the move is neutral.

- *along with his wife and two sons* – During that time period and in Israelite culture, households were multi-generational and organized around a patriarch, so the original audience would not be surprised at all to find out that the man's wife and sons were part of the move.
- *The man's name was Elimelech . . .* – Note how the story continues to be told from the male's perspective. This is consistent with the narratives of Genesis, and would be familiar to the Israelite audience. Ex., Noah (Gen. 6:9); Abraham (Gen. 11:27-12:1); and Isaac (Gen. 25:19-20). Elimelech means "my God is king," which seems spiritually positive, as far as it goes; Naomi derives from a word meaning "to be pleasant"; the meanings of the sons' names are more uncertain. Some think Mahlon is derived from "to be sick" and Chilion "to be finished." It seems odd that Elimelech and Naomi would have chosen such ominous names for their sons. In any event, the narrator does not comment on the meaning of Elimelech, Mahlon, or Chilion.
- *Ephrathites . . .* – The region around Bethlehem was sometimes called "Ephrathah," so commentators think "Ephrathites" identifies the families as members of this clan within the tribe of Judah. The family completes the dangerous journey to Moab and settles somewhere in Moab.
- *Elimelech, Naomi's husband died . . .* – After escaping the famine, tragedy strikes. Note the shift to Naomi's perspective. The fact about Elimelech's death emphasized by the narrator is that Naomi and her sons were left alone. Despite often valid criticisms of ancient patriarchal marriage customs, it is important to recognize that OT marriages are frequently depicted as emotionally rich partnerships, and the loss of a spouse was

typically regarded as causing great grief, just as it would today. The narrator emphasizes that loss by saying Naomi and her sons were “left alone.” But she still had her sons, who fortunately were adults. This does not diminish the emotional loss of a spouse or a father; it just means that Naomi and her adult sons could hope to continue Elimelech and Naomi’s lineage and work.

- *Her sons married Moabite women . . .* – Despite Elimelech’s death, Naomi’s sons decide to stay in Moab and married Moabite women named Ruth and Orpah. Modern commentators are not sure what the wives’ names meant. Moab was not in the list of nations to be destroyed and not intermarried with. Deut. 7:1-4. On the other hand, Moabites were not allowed to enter the tabernacle or temple, Deut 23:3-4, and, at the time of the Exodus, Moabite women lead some Israelite men into idolatry, Numbers 25:1-3, so the original audience likely would have viewed these marriages as spiritually risky, but not prohibited. The narrator, however, refrains from praising or condemning the marriages.
- *The lived there about 10 years . . .* – The “temporary” stay in Moab extends for 10 years, then more catastrophe strikes. Both of Naomi’s sons die, leaving her bereft of all the important males in her life. The emotional devastation of losing both of her children would have been just as terrible in Naomi’s time as today, but the economic impact would also be devastating in a world with no insurance, no social security, and no powered machinery. And even assuming that in that time period three women could operate a small farm/ranch by themselves successfully, they would not have any way to protect it from predatory men in a society because there was no police force, and Naomi did not even have any extended family nearby. One reason OT law repeatedly instructs the Israelites to be kind to widows and resident aliens is because everyone knew they were powerless and vulnerable. See Exo. 22:21-24; Deut. 10:17-19. Moreover, there is another unfortunate event hidden within these verses: despite being married 10 years, neither son has a child, meaning there is no up and coming generation to carry on Elimelech and Naomi’s work. The original audience would be aware that children were a covenant blessing (Deut. 28:4, 11), and the absence of children was a covenant punishment (Deut. 28:18). But, once again, the narrator offers no commentary on why this devastating sequence of events happened to Naomi and her sons.
- *Summing up* -- What appears to be the story of man named Elimelech instead turns out to be the story of Naomi, a woman afflicted by a series of catastrophes leaving her in a foreign country without her husband, sons, or even any extended relatives, except for her Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. The introduction raises questions like: What will happen to Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah now? Can they even survive? Is there any safe place they can go? Should they stay together or separate?

Scene 1B Naomi powerfully argues that Ruth and Orpah should take the road to Moab because Naomi’s situation is hopeless (1:6-13)

- *Naomi hears that the Lord provides food . . .* -- News arrives in Moab that the Lord has helped the Israelites in Bethlehem by ending the famine that drove Elimelech and

Naomi to Moab. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem. Her daughters-in-law plan to go with her, following the custom of the time that a bride joins her husband's household and remains in that household. Their journey would be especially dangerous with no male companions, and there was no way to know what awaited them. Would any of Naomi's extended family still be in Bethlehem? And would they be willing to help Naomi and her foreign daughters-in-law?

- *Naomi urges Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers' homes* – As they are literally on the road toward Bethlehem, Naomi urges Ruth and Orpah to return to their “mothers' homes” in Moab. In this patriarchal age, fathers were considered responsible for unmarried daughters. Ex., Gen. 38:11; Num. 30:3-5; Judges 19:2-3. Naomi's reference to their “mothers” emphasizes that Naomi is merely a mother-in-law, and they have actual mothers who would probably be happy to provide a home for them.
- *May the Lord show kindness to you . . .* – Naomi shows her belief in the Lord by petitioning the Lord to bless or show kindness to Ruth and Orpah by providing them with new husbands as a reward for the kindness they demonstrated to Naomi's sons and her while they lived together. Naomi is also arguing that Ruth and Orpah had already fulfilled any obligation they owed to Naomi as daughters-in-law, so they should take the more logical route and start over in their parents' homes. Naomi kisses them as a way of demonstrating she is not only fine with them leaving her, but she is encouraging them to leave. Naomi's request for a blessing upon Ruth and Orpah is consistent with Gen. 12:1-3. It also indicates that Naomi believed the Lord was capable of providing blessing in Moab, in contrast to many ancient people who thought their god's power was limited to a particular area or function.
- *“We will go back with you to your people.”* – Ruth and Orpah both decline Naomi's gracious offer and maintain that they are willing to accompany Naomi to Israel, a significant sacrifice, as Moabite widows would be more likely from a human perspective to find safety, support, and an opportunity to build a new life in Moab rather than as resident aliens in Bethlehem.
- *Naomi insists that Ruth and Orpah flee from Naomi's hopeless situation.* – Naomi intensifies her argument. She shows her affection for Ruth and Orpah and acknowledges their affection for her by repeatedly calling them daughters. But she nevertheless commands them to leave. Her argument may seem strange to modern readers. It was based on the OT law that brothers have a duty to marry widows when a brother dies without an heir. Deut. 25:5-10. Naomi lists three separate reasons why staying with her would be hopeless for her and them: (1) she is too old to marry; (2) even if she could marry, she is too old to have more sons; and (3) even if she could have sons, Ruth and Orpah could not afford to wait for them to become old enough to marry them. It may seem odd to us that her argument is so marriage and child-centric. But in that place and time building a household was the only respectable livelihood for a woman to pursue. Everyone's household was their business and legacy. Naomi has no ability to help them build a new household by providing new husbands for them. Although Naomi doesn't mention it, there is also no reason to believe Naomi could find

an Israelite husband for them, given Naomi's destitute status and Ruth and Orpah's Moabite heritage.

- *It is more bitter for me than you/my situation is too bitter for you.* . . . –The Hebrew word translated as “bitter,” *marah*, functions much like the English word. Used literally, it can mean a sharply unpleasant taste, such as the bitter herbs in Ex. 12:6 eaten at Passover to remind the Israelites of their suffering in Egypt, or the bitter water in Num. 15:22-25 that was undrinkable until the Lord transformed it. But the Hebrew word is also used figuratively to describe an intense feeling of inconsolable grief or hopelessness. Zech. 12:10; Job 27:2. Commentators debate whether Naomi is saying (1) the situation is more bitter/hopeless for herself (because her work and legacy is irretrievably lost due to her older age) than her daughters-in-law (because they still have a realistic shot at starting anew in Moab) or (2) Naomi's situation is so bitter/hopeless (because her work and legacy is irretrievably lost due to her older age) that Ruth and Orpah should flee from Naomi's shipwreck while they still can (because they have a realistic shot at starting anew in Moab). Naomi's point is basically the same under either translation: Ruth and Orpah should abandon Naomi because Naomi's situation is hopeless, but if Ruth and Orpah leave now they would have a realistic chance at building new lives in Moab.
- *The Lord's hand has gone out against me* – These words suggest one more reason Naomi's situation is completely bitter or hopeless: her current dire circumstances are the result of the Lord's opposition. In fact, given Naomi's view that the Lord is sovereign, this is the most important reason of all. If Naomi is correct that the Lord is opposed to her, then leaving her is the smart thing for Ruth and Orpah to do. See Jonah 1:13-16.
- *Summary:* This scene forces Ruth, Orpah, and the reader to confront the question of how Ruth and Orpah should respond to this series of catastrophes. From a merely human perspective, it is hard to refute Naomi's argument that Ruth and Orpah are more likely to rebuild their own work and legacy in Moab than by staying with Naomi. And even taking into account spiritual considerations, Naomi's perception that the events of her life mean the Lord is opposed to her seems logical.

Scene 1C: Orpah returns to Moab but Ruth pledges allegiance to Naomi (1:14-19)

- *Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye . . .* -- After sharing a good cry about the hopelessness of Naomi's situation, and likely their inability to do anything about it, Orpah accepts Naomi's release and heads back to her home in Moab.
- *Your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her* – Naomi argues a third time that Ruth should go back to Moab. This time Naomi acknowledges that this choice carries spiritual implications—returning to Ruth's childhood home in Moab would mean realigning with Moabite culture, including its religion. Some commentators criticize Naomi for encouraging Ruth and Orpah to turn away from the Lord, and they have a solid theological point. This is very poor missions work. But IMO we should all have sympathy for Naomi's failure. At this moment, Naomi must have felt like being in a covenant with the Lord had resulted in one disaster after another. From

her fallible, grief-wracked perspective, she sees no upside for Ruth and Orpah continuing to be spiritually aligned with Naomi. More on this topic later.

- *Where you go, I will go . . .* – Despite Naomi’s powerful logic, and despite Orpah’s example, Ruth pledges lifelong allegiance to Naomi regardless of circumstances, including probability of success or failure. Ruth does not naively assume everything will turn out all right. Ruth recognizes that this decision has spiritual implications and that she is choosing to align with Israel and the Lord. Having just listened to Naomi, Ruth also had to realize her commitment meant that she was giving up any logical chance of building her own household and legacy. From a worldly perspective, it is a wildly impractical decision. And in light of Naomi’s perception that the Lord is opposed to her, it is also risky from a spiritual perspective. It is one of the most beautiful expressions of selfless love in the entire Bible.
- *Naomi stopped urging her . . .* – Ruth’s passionate commitment carries the day, and Naomi stops urging Ruth to leave. This scene partially resolves the question of what the women will do next. Orpah make a logical choice: if Naomi’s situation is as hopeless as Naomi claims, then why should Orpah throw away her chance at rebuilding her life in Moab? The narrator makes no negative comment about Orpah’s decision. But the contrast between Orpah’s logical but self-serving choice and Ruth’s impractical but selfless choice generates an intriguing plotline for the reader: how will these choices turn out?

Scene 1D: Naomi reaches Bethlehem with Ruth but feeling empty and bitter (1:19-22)

- *They came to Bethlehem* – Although the journey probably was difficult and dangerous, Naomi and Ruth arrive safely in Bethlehem, and the narrator provides no details about the journey. The narrator focuses on the reaction of the town’s people, especially the women. The whole town is “stirred,” indicating that a significant portion of the town remembered Naomi, and had an emotional reaction to her arrival. The term used could mean positive excitement or negative concern or stress or perhaps both. People often feel multiple emotions at once.
- *Can this be Naomi?* – The female residents’ question is also ambiguous. It could express excited happiness because no one expected her to return, i.e., can you believe *Naomi* came back? But it could also express concern due to the effect of Naomi’s troubles: Can *this* be Naomi? It is impossible to know for sure, but I suspect the ambiguity in both “stirred” and the women’s question means the town’s people experienced both types of emotion—happiness that Naomi had returned, but concern due to the obvious toll caused by her troubles.
- *Call me Mara . . .* – Whether or not the women’s question was rhetorical, Naomi declares that she is no longer Naomi/pleasant and should instead be called Mara/bitter. Her declaration fits an ABBA pattern common in Hebrew poetry or wisdom literature:

Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter;
I full went away
But empty brought me back the Lord

Why call me Naomi, because the Lord has opposed me, the Almighty has made me suffer

Naomi is finally with people who knew her when she had hopes and dreams of achieving success and a legacy in this lifetime; she had a husband and two sons, and a plan to build something in Moab; the women of Bethlehem are people who can appreciate the extent of her loss, and Naomi takes the opportunity to express her grief and the extent of her loss in the strongest possible terms; before she was full; now she is empty; before she was pleasant; now she is *very* bitter, i.e., intensely sad and hopeless. Moreover, Naomi again identifies the Lord's opposition to her as the ultimate source of her losses and thus her bitterness. Naomi feels as though she was struggling to build her life brick by brick, and as fast as she could stack bricks, the Lord knocked the bricks down and crushed them into dust. Which certainly explains why she feels utterly hopeless—if the sovereign Lord is against her, then how can she hope for anything good?

Interestingly, Naomi offers no explanation for why the Lord would be opposed to her. Naomi does not admit any sin, and does not suggest that her losses constitute appropriate covenant punishment for sin. Nor does she directly contend that the Lord's opposition is unfair or unjust. She is laser focused on two implications of her losses (1) that the Lord is her opposed to her achieving any success in this life; and (2) there is no reason for her to have any hope for the future.

The narrator does not tell us how the women of Bethlehem responded. The narrator simply lets Naomi's comments hang, thereby cleverly forcing the reader to ponder whether Naomi's assertions are correct. Does this series of catastrophes mean the Lord is opposed to Naomi? Is Naomi's situation truly hopeless? These are the book's central questions, and the narrator skillfully uses the dramatic events of Chapter 1 to present these profound theological questions in the context of a concrete, personal story.

Although the narrator does not directly respond to Naomi's assertion that Lord is opposed to her, at the end of the chapter the narrator subtly offers some interesting food for thought. First, the narrator reminds the reader that Naomi did not in fact return from Moab completely empty, she is with Ruth, her daughter-in-law who was willing to leave her own country to accompany Naomi. Second, the narrator tells the reader that the arrival occurred when the barley harvest was beginning, a marked contrast with the famine in 1:1, and a reminder of 1:6 that, after the famine, the Lord provided food for the people of Bethlehem.

Applications

There are many possible applications in Chapter 1. One simple way to find valid applications is to reflect on the major characters:

Naomi

In Chapter 1, Naomi finds herself beset by a series of terrible events—a famine, the death of a spouse, the absence of grandchildren, then the death of both of her children, leaving her destitute in a foreign land, and too old, destitute, and grief-stricken to have any realistic chance

of rebuilding her work and legacy. Anyone dealing with sadness or setbacks should be able to identify with Naomi's plight. In Chapter 1, Naomi presents an interesting mix of things to emulate and watch out for:

- When tragedy strikes, believers can feel like the tragedy means the Lord is against them;
- When tragedy strikes, believers can feel like nothing good will ever happen to them again;
- Despite those feelings, Naomi does not run away from the Lord; she deliberately moves to the place where she knows the Lord is active;
- When Naomi arrives at the place where the Lord is active, Naomi does not pretend to be all right; Naomi expresses her true feelings even though they are not pretty; this is not something we do much in American Christianity but expressing those thoughts to the Lord is biblical; there are many Psalms of lament, where the Psalmist expresses disappointment with God and/or life; some good examples include Psalm 6, 23, 22, 57, 77, 142)

Ruth

In Chapter 1, Ruth also finds herself beset by a series of terrible events—after marrying into a foreign family aligned with the Lord of Israel, she was unable to have a child for 10 years, then her husband and brother-in-law died, leaving her in a dangerous society with no male protection. Moreover, her mother-in-law is so grief-stricken by the same events that she encourages Ruth to abandon her marital household and stay in Moab, and then seems unable to appreciate Ruth's selfless decision to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem.

- Acting on the values of loyalty, service, and selfless love can be difficult and feel like it requires the actor to sacrifice their own hopes and desires for the benefit of others; by definition selfless love is hard;
- When trying to serve someone in a crisis, don't offer cliches or promise happy outcomes you can't deliver; but do think about how you can actually serve that person and do what you can;
- When trying to serve someone in a serious crisis, don't be surprised or offended if they are unable to immediately appreciate your help; focus on how serving others is the right thing for a follower of Jesus to do, not the amount of appreciation you get from other people; this is the example Jesus set (Mark 10:45; 1 Peter 4:19).