

## PART 1 OF 4: RUTH 1



### INTRODUCTION

Our natural tendencies are toward self-preservation, self-protection, and the promotion of self above everyone else (2 Timothy 3:1a). Our quest is always to find what makes *us* happy... even if *others* have to live with the pain caused by us “following our heart” or “doing what feels right.” (As I write this my mind goes back to a romantic relationship I had in college. She would often say, “I just want to be happy.” Man, I hated hearing that phrase. To me it meant that our romance was ultimately subject to the sovereignty of feelings.) But, so that we are not left to our own depraved desires in the management of relationships, the world has come up with something truly better. Indeed, society offers a superior philosophy of life and love; it is one that has gained popular mindshare and is widely regarded as an improvement over the egocentric notion that I must pursue my own happiness at any cost: *Think win/win!*

Win/Win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions.

Win/Win means that agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial, mutually satisfying. With a Win/Win solution, all parties feel good about the decision and feel committed to the action plan.<sup>1</sup>

The well-known author promoting this paradigm of thinking for “all human interactions” has put a new veneer on a very old concept. While it is certainly better than a me-first mentality it is actually rooted in an outlook and approach to life that is inferior to what God wants for His people. Jesus made it clear thousands of years before the Win/Win catch phrase came into being that such a way of dealing with people is actually beneath what is expected from the people of God:

<sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

<sup>47</sup> And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more *than others*? Do not even the tax collectors do so? (Matthew 5:46-47)

In the gospel according to Luke the itinerant rabbi says that loving when I fully expect to get love is what any run-of-the-mill unrepentant person would do:

<sup>32</sup> “But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> And if you lend *to those* from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. (Luke 6:32-34)

Jesus says, in effect, “Community of faith, stop patting yourself on the back for doing what comes naturally for those who do not know God. It does nothing for your reputation to bless others when you fully intend to get it all back.” In-your-face Jesus is squashing the idea that there is anything praiseworthy in loving those who are good to us; dogs do that. God’s expectations for our personal interactions is higher than me-first mentalities or the fourth habit of highly successful people.

### THE FAIR WEATHERS (RUTH 1:1-5)

<sup>1</sup> Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. <sup>2</sup> The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there. <sup>3</sup> Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. <sup>4</sup> Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. <sup>5</sup> Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.

The aim of the writer of this short Old Testament book is to edify his readership toward unconditional commitment to God and selfless sacrifice for others. He aims to do this with the recitation of a love story featuring the faithfulness of God and foreigners contrasted with the faithlessness of certain Jews. The author is most certainly a Jew and writes assuming

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<sup>1</sup> Covey, Stephen R., *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York, New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 207.

that his audience has a value system conditioned by the Mosaic covenant. With that in mind we do well to read Ruth with a willingness to examine what is presented not just in view of our common values but more importantly in light of the law given to the Jews. Indeed, attempting to evaluate life as presented in Ruth apart from the standards given by God in his covenant with Israel is at the root of the problems experienced by the characters in the story; they just do what seems good to them without regard for the commandments of God. The author presents suffering and loss as the obvious consequence of their self-directed lives. Joy and restoration are presented as the result of submitting to the sovereignty of Yahweh.

Prior to the giving of the law the people of Israel were living according to what was right in their own eyes. The giving of the law was aimed at bringing that practice to an end:

<sup>8</sup> “You shall not at all do as we are doing here today— every man doing whatever *is* right in his own eyes— (Deuteronomy 12:8)

Nevertheless by the time we get to the end of the book of Judges, the book just before Ruth, this is exactly where the people are:

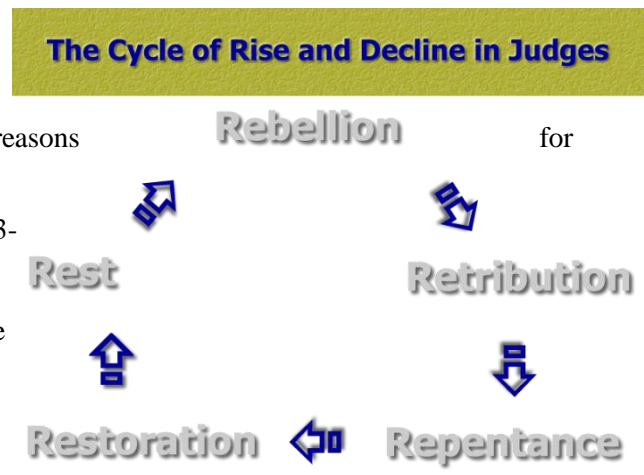
<sup>25</sup> In those days *there was* no king in Israel; everyone did *what was* right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

The author makes a point of saying the story takes place **in the days when the judges ruled**. With this piece of information we are given a key to proper interpretation of the events and characters as they are presented in the short story. During the time of the judges the nation of Israel was in a cycle of spiritual rise and decline. They would rebel against God. There would be a Divine response of rebuking Israel’s unfaithfulness. The people would then repent. God, out of His vast mercy, would restore the people. There would be a period of rest and calm. And then the nation would rebel again.

**LEAVING THE PROMISE (RUTH 1:1-2)**

We are told there is a **famine in the land** without being told exactly why. However, the Mosaic covenant makes it clear that there are two reasons famine:

- **Punitive** – Leviticus 26:18-20 and Deuteronomy 28:23-24 present famine as being an outworking of God’s wrath against disobedience. If rebellion is the cause of the famine then a return to covenant loyalty was the solution.
- **Proving** – Deuteronomy 8:2-6 says that famine could be the result of God’s work of testing His people. If the situation is just a test then the people should be patient and trust God.



Which is it? That is, are we to see the **famine in the land** as punitive or a proving ground for the faith of God’s people? In light of the time period, **when judges ruled** (Judges 21:25; Ruth 1:1), it is better to understand the famine as being the outworking of God’s displeasure with Israel’s disobedience. This make a world of a difference when trying to determine the ethical value of Elimelech’s actions.

In the light of our common values Elimelech is seen as manning up to do what is needed by His family. He is taking care of business and is to be admired for the initiative to move His family to a place where they can be cared for. However, the author expects his readership will see something more. When examined in the light of the Mosaic covenant Elimelech is leaving the land of promise because of hard times.

<sup>15</sup> “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: . . . <sup>18</sup> “Cursed *shall be* the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks. <sup>32</sup> Your sons and your daughters *shall be* given to another people, and your eyes shall look and <sup>k</sup>fail *with longing* for them all day long; and *there shall be* <sup>9</sup>no strength in your hand. (Deuteronomy 28:15, 18, 32)

<sup>k</sup> Ps. 119:82

Since famine is punitive *the act of leaving the land is the same thing as refusing to be punished*. The irony is amazing. Elimelech means “My God is King.” However, his actions make it clear that he does not respect the rule or retribution of God.

The move to Moab must be interpreted in light of the general Israelite disposition toward the Moabites. That disposition seems to have been colored by five factors in their history: (1) the Moabites’ contemptible origins in the incestuous relationship of Lot and his daughter (Gen 19:30–38); (2) the Moabites’ resistance to Israelite passage through their territory when they came from Egypt (Numbers 22–24); (3) the Moabite women’s seduction of the Israelites and the latter’s subsequent punishment (Num 25:1–9); (4) Israel’s constitutional exclusion of Moab from the assembly of the LORD (Deut 23:3–6); and (5) the recent oppression of the Israelites by Eglon the king of Moab (Judg 3:15–30). This combination of factors may explain the impression created by the narrator that of the Bethlehemites only Elimelech’s family sought refuge from the famine in Moab.<sup>21</sup> They also render even more remarkable the whole-hearted acceptance of Ruth successively by Naomi, Boaz, and the people of Bethlehem.<sup>2</sup>

### LOOKING FOR PROSPECTS (RUTH 1:3-5)

God responds to the rebellion of Elimelech by removing him from leadership. Thus **Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died**. The author makes a point of telling his readership what characters are still on the stage. **She was left, and her two sons**. We are then witness to continued decisions that are respectable on the surface but are found to be lethally flawed when examined closer. Specifically, we become onlookers to the problem of their marital choices.

These two sons, whose names **Mahlon** and **Chilion** mean sickly and “wasting away,” are living in a foreign land. We expect that when they seek spouses that they will probably find them in the local community. We can understand and respect this. After all, it is better that they get married rather than live in sin. However, we are failing to see that their marriages were prohibited. God has expressly forbid his people to marry people who were pagans:

<sup>3</sup> Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. <sup>4</sup> For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. (Deuteronomy 7:3-4)

Even the wisdom of Solomon was not able to withstand the corrupting influence that comes with marrying someone who does not love God.

<sup>1</sup> But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, *and* Hittites— <sup>2</sup> from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, “You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love. <sup>3</sup> And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. <sup>4</sup> For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as *was* the heart of his father David. <sup>5</sup> For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. <sup>6</sup> Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not fully follow the LORD, as *did* his father David. <sup>7</sup> Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, on the hill that *is* east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the abomination of the people of Ammon. (1 Kings 11:1-7)

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<sup>9</sup> nothing you can do

<sup>21</sup> On the surface David’s sojourning among the enemy Philistines in 1 Samuel 27 seems similar, but unlike Elimelech, David was fleeing from Saul, who sought his life.

<sup>2</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 627). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Naomi's two sons, following in the rebellion of their father, are also removed from the scene. Rather than travel 30 miles back home to find wives that would have been acceptable they find wives that God has prohibited (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). Both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband. Make no mistake they are also gone due to their decision to live according to what was right in their own eyes; the barrenness of their wives also depicts them as having entered relationships outside of God's favor (Deuteronomy 28:18).

The barrenness of Ruth and Orpah too must be interpreted as evidence of the punitive though hidden hand of God (Deut 28:18). Indeed later it would take an act of God to enable Ruth, who had been barren, to conceive and bear a son for Boaz (4:13)<sup>3</sup>

Some will say that the Moabites are not on the list of nations that Israel cannot marry. This response misses the point of the prohibition; marrying the unbeliever leads to more unbelief.

#### LIVING WITH THE PENALTY (RUTH 1:5)

Poor Naomi is living with the penalty of the rebellion. Bereft of husband and children she is now empty-handed. This is the inevitable consequence of doing whatever is right in our own eyes. The rapid decline of modern society into an abyss of grotesque brutalities, terrible acts of extortion, and the destroying of marriage is the outworking of doing what we think is right... regardless of what the word of God says. Believer are not immune to the effects of disobedience. The marriages of so-called Christians are in no better shape than their non-believing counterparts because of our refusal to do what God says.

*The self-directed life cheats the believer out of the promises that are theirs if they love Him no matter what. (John 10:10)*

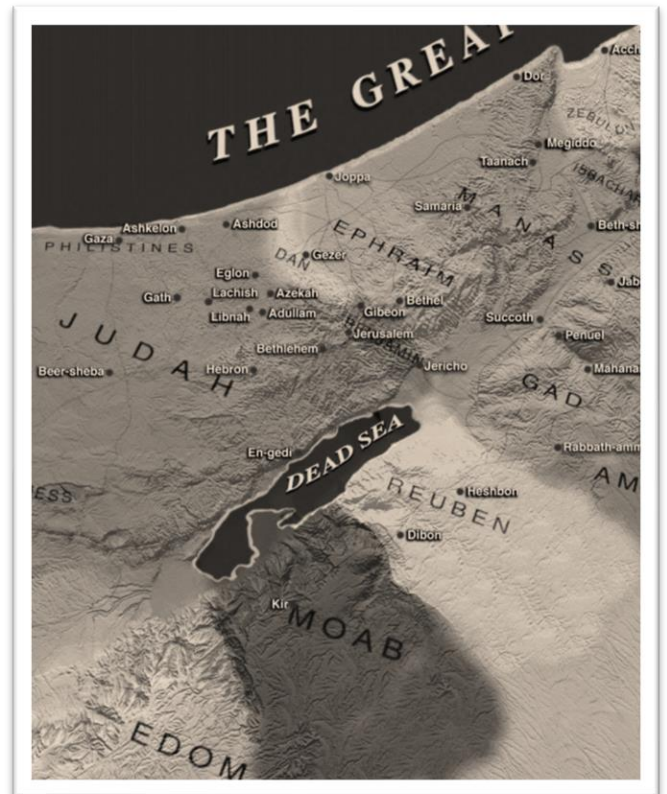
#### THE FAREWELLS (RUTH 1:6-18)

Naomi is ready to go home. Accompanying the elderly woman are her two daughters-in-law: namely they are Orpah and Ruth. The name Orpah means "back of the neck" and the name of Ruth is roughly translated "friend." These two Moabite women married into a Jewish family. At one time they had husbands. Now they just have their mother-in-law. From the world's perspective this is not a Win/Win (Ruth 1:11-13). Without husbands or sons it would be very difficult for them to own property, have an inheritance, or be taken care of later in life.

When faced with the hard facts Orpah gives in. In effect she says, "There is no point to staying with Naomi. What for? She cannot help me anymore. I've got to do what's right for me at this point. It is time to look out for myself." Her commitment to Naomi, though it seemed genuine, is like the commitment of Judas to Jesus. End the end, when there was nothing else for Him to get out of the Son of God, he betrayed the Lord with a kiss (Matthew 26:48-49). In the end, when there is nothing to be gained from Naomi, she turns her in for the promise of a better life back in Moab (Ruth 1:14). The meaning of her name is now fulfilled in her actions. In fact the last mention of her refers to her having **gone back to her people and her gods**. We are made to think about Orpah on the road back to Moab and we can only see her back as she goes.

*Relationships built on the Win/Win paradigm are sound as long as there is something to gain for all parties involved. In the absence of the opportunity for shared benefit they will crumble.*

At first glance Naomi's words seem to be good. She is trying to look after Ruth and therefore encourages her to **return after her sister-in-law**. However, her words are actually further confirmation of how far her family had fallen away from



<sup>3</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 629). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

the principles given to them in the Mosaic covenant. Naomi is not merely encouraging Ruth to go back to a place of possible physical prosperity, she is telling her to return the false gods of the Moabites. The penalty for encouraging someone to be involved in any type of pagan worship was death (Deuteronomy 13:6-10). Yet Naomi says, "If going back to your false gods is going to make for a better life in this world, you need to go back." Indeed, for the sake of physical benefit, Naomi had attempted to send Ruth back to Moab and another god (Ruth 1:15).

But the Moabite woman has a better understanding of covenant than the people of God. Using language reminiscent of Genesis the author says that Ruth **clung** to Naomi. Using this word we are made to see that Ruth is living out the calling to cling to the family that she was married into even after there is no longer any obvious benefit (Genesis 2:24). She is not under the law of her husband but is compelled by her conscience toward God to stay with Naomi. She has set aside her own interests in order to promote the interests of others.

### **THE FIVE COMMITMENTS OF RUTH TO NAOMI (RUTH 1:16-17)**

True friendship is fellowship based on choice. It is an ongoing commitment to be close and promote the good of someone even at our own loss. Jesus makes this type of illogical commitment to us; it is crazy love. Before the incarnation and earthly ministry of the Lord there was a woman named Ruth who made deep and binding commitments to a person who could not pay her back. Although Naomi had nothing to offer, Ruth set aside her own interests to protect, promote, and provide for her. When the elderly Naomi tried to make Ruth see the folly of being faithful it prompted the young woman to declare her unconditional determination to be her friend. Look at Ruth's five commitments:

- **The Commitment to Naomi's Leading** "wherever you go, I will go" - this speaks of a surrender and submission to Naomi as an authority in her life (3:5).
- **The Commitment to Naomi's Living Conditions** "wherever you lodge, I will lodge" - in this second commitment Ruth has abandoned claims to comfort or convenience. In this pledge Ruth has renounced her preferences in order to be continually present with Naomi in the day-to-day challenges associated with wherever the matriarch decides to live.
- **The Commitment to Naomi's Life** (Family, Friends, Culture) "your people shall be my people" - through this third promise Ruth has said "those who mean much to you now mean much to me." Do not overlook the fact that this commitment is not weakened by caveats. This may unwise (1 Kings 11:3-4; Deuteronomy 17:17; Nehemiah 13:26; 1 Corinthians 15:33).
- **The Commitment to Naomi's Lord** "and your God, my God" - in her fourth commitment Ruth has forsaken her plurality of gods (1:15) for the monotheistic faith of Naomi (Deuteronomy 6:4). She makes her saying solemn by calling a curse upon herself for letting anything come between them; the curse is based on Naomi's God using his covenant name - *Yahweh*.
- **The Commitment to Naomi's Leaving** - in her fifth and final commitment the Moabitess dedicates herself to dying where Naomi dies; she will not shed her promises with the coming of death. After Naomi has died Ruth, if she can, will remain in that place and die there as well. Moreover, she will be buried in that place.

What are we to do with Ruth's radical commitments to Naomi? Lay them aside as the unreasonable promises of a young widow to an old widow? No! Learn from them, brethren. She is in the Bible not as a literary figure but as a laudable leader in the high calling to love sacrificially (John 15:12-13). She admonishes and advises us to leave behind an inferior friendship that says, "I will be good to you if it is good for me" to advance into a superior kind of friendship that endures dark times and blesses others even when there is nothing in this life to gain. Later one of her descendants would put it this:

<sup>12</sup> This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. (John 15:12-13, NKJV)

### **THE FRIEND (RUTH 1:19-22)**

The contrast is amazing! Where Elimelech's family is always after what is easiest and best for themselves Ruth the Moabite is unconditionally committed to God, his people, and the elderly Naomi. Before meeting this young pagan Naomi's family was truly *Ruthless*; They refused to be chastened by God and entered into relationships primarily for mutual benefit.

*Ruthless society is governed by godless principles, comprised of people unconditionally committed to themselves, and rooted in relationships based on the opportunity for mutual rewards.*

Ruth's behavior, in contrast to the situational ethics of the people around her, is not controlled by her circumstances. She loves even when there is nothing to gain.

*The spirit of Ruth relentlessly blesses those who cannot help her even when it costs her life. (Luke 6:32-35; Philippians 2:5-8; John 15:12-13)*

After all that has happened Ruth comes alongside her mother-in-law to be a friend when there is nothing in it for her. She stays with her although there is no hope of getting a husband for herself. Indeed, Ruth lays down her life for Naomi (John 15:12-13). You would think that Naomi would be appreciative. However, when she describes herself to her friends, she says that she has come home empty. Ruth may have thought, "So what am I? Chopped Liver?" But there is no indicator that she took offense; she is driven by a sincere love for this ungrateful woman.

*The spirit of Ruth comes alongside those who are weak to strengthen their hands even when it is unappreciated. (1 Corinthians 13:1-8)*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS**

- When you look at the tragedies in your own life, who has been there for you even when it was not in their best interest? Recall that in 1:11-13 Naomi says there is no win for Ruth. However in 1:16-17 Ruth is unconditionally committed to Naomi.
- When dealing with crisis do you identify more with Naomi (Ruth 1:8-9, 11-13, 15, 20-21; Deuteronomy 13:6-10), Orpah (Ruth 1:9-10, 14), or Ruth (Ruth 1:16-17)? Why? Note: Do not try to impress anyone with your answers. The point is to start dealing honestly with who we really are in moments of crisis.
- Why was Elimelech's decision to go to Moab not a good one (Numbers 22-24; 25:1-9; Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Judges 3:15-30)?
- Think of someone that you can help who is not really in a position to help you. What does it look like to be Ruth to them this week?