

# Ruth 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 06 July 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Ruth chapter 1 These took Moabite wives, the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth.

They lived there about ten years, and both Malon and Kilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. 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.

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. 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. 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.

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

[ 1 : 31 ] 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, would you therefore wait till they were grown?

Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter for me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. Then they lifted up their voices and wept again.

And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her guards. Return after your sister-in-law. 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 guard my guard. 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. And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.

[ 2 : 33 ] And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, Is this Naomi? She said to them, Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me? So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab.

And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. The story of Ruth is an unusual one. It's set in the time of the judges, but it starkly contrasts with what we find in that book.

There are no great battles or military heroes. There's no real focus upon the political situation. And it seems as if the larger state of the nation has fallen away from view. In its place, we have a quiet story of faithfulness in an unexpected person, and in a person of seemingly little account.

But yet, when we look closer at this story, we see some great themes converging in it. And there are ways to read it against other stories that will prove illuminating, something that will become more apparent as we go through it.

[ 3 : 43 ] We could read it against the backdrop of the story of the judges. This is faithfulness in a dark time. It should also be read against the devastating events at the end of that book. It could be read against the backdrop of Deuteronomy.

Certain of the laws of Deuteronomy come into play here. The gleaning laws, the leveret commandments, and also the place of the Moabite in the congregation. And we see here that the law can serve a redemptive purpose.

It can bring wholeness in a situation where there was once brokenness. It can be read against the backdrop of Genesis. Broken threads within the story of Genesis are tied together by God many centuries later.

The story of Lot and Sodom is in the background here. Leaving a place of death, the loss of two sons-in-law, and two daughters who want to have offspring. Ruth, of course, is a descendant of one of those daughters of Lot.

There's also the story of Judah and Tamar. Once again, two sons dying at the beginning, and a widow who seeks a leveret marriage. And many of the same themes emerging there.

[ 4 : 45 ] Boaz, of course, is a descendant of Judah. We might also notice the important ten-generation pattern that we find in Genesis. From the story of Cain and Abel to the story of Noah.

From the story of Noah to Abraham. From Abraham to Boaz and Ruth. The story of Cain and Abel is a story of a dead brother and another brother taking his place. Seth taking the place of Abel.

The story of Noah is the story of three brothers and one brother who is judged. Ham and his son Canaan. The story of Abraham is a story of a dead brother too, and two other brothers stepping in to raise up seed for that dead brother.

The fact that many similar themes occur ten generations later should not surprise us. These old stories are playing out in the background of the story of Ruth. What may seem to us at first glance to be a story of an out-of-the-way place, with a woman of little account, is the story of some great themes of redemptive history coming to a new expression.

Of course, we can also read the story of Ruth as part of the backdrop to 1 Samuel. In Ruth, we take a crucial step towards the birth of David. The story starts with a famine and a man from Bethlehem who goes to Sodjan in the land of Moab with his two sons, Malon and Kilion, and his wife Naomi.

[ 6 : 03 ] The story is introduced as the story of a man, but the man dies in the third verse. Elimelech, however, is an important part of the story. The women will be raising up seed for this dead man.

This story is a story of resurrection. It's reminiscent of Abram's sojourn in Egypt during the famine as well, but they are tarrying and settling there. And it's ironic that they go from Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is the house of bread. Elimelech dies and Malon and Kilion take Moabite wives. They seem to be intermarrying and assimilating with the Moabites. In chapter 4 verse 10, we discover that Ruth married Malon, which presumably means that Orpah married Kilion.

Naomi is settling outside of the promised land among the Moabites, where they should not be. The language used for settling here is the same expression as we find in Genesis chapter 11 on two occasions.

In both of these cases, the expression is ominous.

[ 7 : 22 ] In Terah's case, there is a settling short of the land. Abram has to leave and move to Canaan. Reading that wider passage in Genesis chapter 11, verses 27 to 32, we can see more similarities.

Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abraham, Nahor and Haran, and Haran fathered Lot. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans.

And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren.

She had no child. Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife. And they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan.

But when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran. There's an older barren woman. There's dead men.

[ 8 : 23 ] There's the practice of levirate marriage, as Nahor takes the daughter of his dead brother to raise up seed for him. Eventually there's also the leaving of the father's house. The ten years that they spend in the land of Moab might also remind us of the ten years that Abram spent in Canaan, in Genesis chapter 16 verse 3, before he took Hagar.

Malon and Kilion mean sickness and destruction, and they're fitting names. They die in the land of Moab. Naomi, ironically, means pleasantness, which is an important detail to keep in mind as we read further.

They receive news that the Lord has visited his people. This is language associated with deliverance and salvation elsewhere. And now they're going to return to the land from the place of death.

And the two daughters-in-law of Naomi accompany her, showing loyalty to her. Naomi instructs each of them to return to her mother's house, but they both stick with her. Her instruction to them to return to their mother's house and to their gods is a sort of inversion of the Abraham themes that are already bubbling away in the background of the text.

The Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. Naomi seems to request that Orpah and Ruth do the opposite.

[ 9 : 41 ] They both insist on staying with her, though. She then makes a stronger case. She is barren. She's too old to remarry. And even if those things weren't the case, they would have to wait far too long for new sons to marry.

Orpah means back of the neck, which seems appropriate as she turns back at this point. Ruth, however, expresses the most extreme loyalty to her mother-in-law at this point, in keeping with the meaning of her name, friend.

She describes her bond with Naomi as akin to one of marriage. This is an extreme act of loving-kindness on Ruth's part. She is giving up her country, her family and everything that she's known to stick with her mother-in-law.

This is remarkable loving-kindness. And Ruth's loving-kindness is a central theme of this story. It reflects the Lord's own loving-kindness, and it will be the means by which life is brought to a dead situation.

The most similar account of such loyalty that we find is in 2 Samuel 15, verses 19-22. Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, Why do you also go with us?

[ 10 : 44 ] Go back and stay with the king, for you are a foreigner and also an exile from your home. You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us, since I go I know not where?

Go back and take your brothers with you, and may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you. But Ittai answered the king, As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king shall be, whether for death or for life, there also will your servant be.

And David said to Ittai, Go then, pass on. So Ittai the Gittite passed on with all his men and all the little ones who were with him. Ittai the Gittite is another foreigner who shows great loyalty to the family of David.

Just as here, David's great-grandmother Ruth shows considerable loyalty and loving-kindness to Naomi. In both cases, we see a remarkable Gentile being knit into the people of God.

Naomi returns and is recognized after her long absence. However, she wishes to be called Naomi, pleasantness, no more. Now she wants to be called Mara, bitter, as she has suffered cruel providences from the Lord.

[ 11 : 53 ] They arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. There may be a sign here of new life. A question to consider. In what ways could Ruth's commitment to Naomi be seen as a conversion?

