

# Ruth 1v1-5

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'll do turn up the book of Ruth, page 222. As Paul said, we're going to be in this book! in the mornings for a number of weeks now. And Ruth, as a book, is a love story. And when it comes to love stories, a plot that says they met, they fell in love, the end, doesn't sell.

That doesn't get a Hollywood contract. Think of any of the classics. That's not been the plot line. However, their lives were hard. They found each other. And against all the odds and in the face of great adversity, they made it. That's a Hollywood banker. That'll make you very rich if you find another way of saying that same version. That is the sort of plot line that you see in the best kind of love stories. And the book of Ruth is really that kind of love story. It is full of intrigue and tension. It's couched in adversity and sadness and pain. And we see this morning in these first five verses that we're looking at that it begins with broken hearts and tears and tears and pain and sadness. One of the great questions that we have as human beings when life is like that is, well, where is God? Isn't that the question of the ages? When people suffer and struggle and life is difficult, people ask the question, where is God in all of this?

When your heart is broken, when you suffer, when you struggle, where is He? And this first paragraph of the story, it reads like so many people feel, doesn't it? In the midst of real pain, He seems completely absent. Did you notice in verses 1 to 5, God's name isn't even mentioned? But as we read on, and as we get to the end, it is only four chapters long, this little book, but as we read through the story, we discover that God is far from absent. In fact, in the unfolding romance between Ruth and this figure who will emerge called Boaz is that God is at work in remarkable ways throughout the whole. He's there in the darkness. He's there in the tension of the romance, and He's there in the consummation of the story. He's there the whole way through. And it's important that we see the book of Ruth isn't just this individual love story between these two people, nor is it even about their two families, significant as both of those are. But when we get to the end of the book, if you turn over the page, chapter 4, you find that there is a list of names there, a list of names that connect us to David. The last word in the book, David, God's covenant king. And if we were to keep going all the way through to Matthew chapter 1, in the list of names at the beginning of Matthew chapter 1,

Ruth's name is there, and she's named in the family tree of David's great heir, the Lord Jesus Christ. The story of Ruth is part of a bigger love story, a bigger story of redemption, as we see that God is ordering history. He's ordering history through all the twists and turns, through the darkness and the light, through the struggle and the success, the suffering and the pain and everything else, to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. And Jesus is the one above all who in great love, through great danger and great adversity, redeems His bride, the church.

[ 3 : 56 ] So, Ruth, this little book, is ultimately a story of hope. And I want to say that because as we begin this morning, it doesn't feel like it. We start in the darkness. We're in this little prologue.

We're taken up with three things. The author is taken up with three things. The scene is dark, and there are three things he wants us to see. The first is history, the second is irony, and the third is tragedy. So, let's start there. Point number one, history. Our author begins by locating us at a particular point in time. Verse 1, in the days when the judges ruled. So, the events of this book, the book of Ruth, take place in the time of the book immediately previous. And what we have there in the book immediately previous is a theological history of God's people as they went through a repeated cycle, a cycle of disobedience, disaster, repentance, and deliverance. So, they turned away from God. It went really badly for them. They went all the way down. They realized that. They turned back to Him, and He delivered them. The people would turn from God, and there would be judgment for that sin.

And they would see that failure. They would come back to Him, and He would raise up a great deliverer, one of the judges, until that judge died, and then the cycle would happen again. And the story of the book of Ruth then takes place in that context between 1250 and 1050 B.C. It's at one of the darkest points in the life of Israel. The people were in such a mess that they had almost completely lost their identity as the people of God. To begin this book with the line, in the days when the judges ruled, we are being taken to a point in history when everything for the people of God was almost as bad as it could be. But against that backdrop, the author introduces us to these people, and he introduces them by name. Did you see that the meaning of these names that we have in the beginning here is significant? But it is also important to see that he's being specific. Elimelech, Naomi, Malon, Killian,

Orpah, Ruth. Almost all that you needed to know about this family was done by the end of verse 1. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem and Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. In terms of setting us where we need to be with the people that we need to understand, that's more or less it. But he gives us their names.

And then, as I said, the book closes with a list of names to make the point that this is real history involving real people in their real lives. This isn't just a man and his wife and their two sons. It is a particular man named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their sons, Malon and Killian. It's not a fantasy, this story. The people are real, and their experiences are real too. And what that means is that in the midst of the spiritual chaos and the political upheaval of life in Bethlehem under the judges, despite the upheaval of moving because there was a famine, God knows these people. He is at work in their lives and the circumstances of real people bringing his purposes to pass. And it is no different today. In the days when Trump and Putin and Starmer ruled, for however long that's going to be, however hard and confusing life gets for us, God is ordering history. He is ordering history now as he was ordering it then, and he will order it every single step of the way until Christ returns.

[ 7 : 46 ] And he knows your name. Whoever you are, he knows your name. Elimelech is likely very wealthy. We're told that he's an Ephrathite, and the Ephrathites were a kind of aristocracy. So there was plenty available. But by verse 5, do you see Naomi has lost everything? Verse 5, They took Moabite wives. The name of one was Orpa, the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Malon and Kilian died so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. In fact, it's telling that the author, having made such a thing about the names, has withdrawn them again symbolically. Everyone died, and the woman, not Naomi, is left without her two sons, not Malon and Kilian, or her husband, not Elimelech. It's as if she hasn't just lost what she had, but who she is. But our story has only just begun. It might appear that she has lost everything, but God takes note of every life, and he holds her future in his hand. Whatever your circumstances here this morning, whatever you may have done in your past, whatever you have done up to this point in life, you are not beyond God's reach. The God of all history knows your name, and He can meet you even in the darkest circumstances. Our author places us, first of all, in a dark period of history, but he also then writes with a dark irony. That's our second point, irony. We see this first verse, 1, in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab. The name Bethlehem means house of bread, but there's a famine. The land which God described as flowing with milk and honey in Exodus 3 and 13 has no food. Now, the reason for the famine is that God's people have turned their back on Him. They're at the point in the judges' cycle where God has brought judgment for their sin. This was stated up front in the covenant that God made with His people. I will be your God, you will be my people. That is the covenant promise. I will be your God, you will be my people. And there is blessing for obedience, and there is a penalty for disobedience.

Back in Deuteronomy 28, God had threatened that famine would result of His people sinned against Him. So, because the people have knowingly rejected their God, here it is. He said, if you go that way, there'll be famine. They went that way, so there's famine. Now, the goal of the covenant penalties, the curses, was the people's repentance. The goal was that they would be chastened by God, and in an act of His grace, He would chasten them so that they would see what they had done, they would repent of their sins, and they would return to Him. But that's not what this family does. And that highlights the second irony, verse 2. The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi.

The name Elimelech means, the Lord is my king, or my God the king. But Elimelech's actions show that he very definitely doesn't trust the Lord as his king.

What has happened? A crisis has come his way. There's a famine. And what should that have made him do? It should have made him turn back to the Lord. He should have turned back to the Lord and turned his family that way as well. But instead, what does he do? He uproots his family, and he heads for, of all places, Moab. Now, why of all places? This is an astonishing decision for an Israelite to make.

Because, well, first of all, where he left, and secondly, where he went. Firstly, leaving the land which God had specifically given to that nation would have been a very clear statement of leaving God, walking away from God. God's presence was especially rooted in the land. The tabernacle was there, which was a symbol of God's presence among His people. And Elimelech, my lord the king, left.

[ 12 : 16 ] But he didn't just leave to go any old place. The fact that he went to Moab of all places, a people that worshiped the fire god Chemosh, well, that was prohibited completely, Deuteronomy 23, verse 3. Don't have anything to do with the Moabites. And my lord the king has taken his family to a land where another god, a god who demanded child sacrifice, Chemosh, was king.

He left the place where God was and God's people were to be, and he went to the place where God wasn't worshipped, and he chose to do that, expressly going against what God had said. It is a dark irony, indeed, that Elimelech left God to find security and provision elsewhere. He bore the name of the Lord, and yet he left that one who promised blessing in the hope of satisfaction under the rule of another god.

Well, let's be as charitable as we can be. Perhaps he thought he was being prudent. We're told, verse 1, his intention was to sojourn in the country of Moab. Perhaps just sit things out until the famine passes. Perhaps even go to Moab, plunder the Moabites, get a load of their stuff and bring it back.

I don't know. But what happens? Verse 2, the family remain there. Soon their sons take Moabite wives, completely forbidden by God. And before they know it, verse 4, we're told the detail that they were there about 10 years. So what began as a sojourn, we could say with giving the most charitable reading here, he thought he was being clever. I'm going to go and do it this way. I know God says not to, but this is actually being really prudent. We'll go, we'll take what the Moabites have. We'll go back.

Then the sons take Moabite wives. They settle there. They stay there 10 years. Elimelech didn't like the situation that he found himself in. And rather than turn to God, rather than to see the famine even as a chance to repent of his sins, to submit himself to his God, the King, and to trust him, he walked away. If we put it most simply, Elimelech believed that the answer to his struggles would be found by walking away from God. And let's be honest, we find it very easy to do exactly the same. Look around our nation. We're in a famine in our nation, not a famine of food, we've plenty of that, but of righteousness. There is a famine of righteousness in the land. People have turned their backs on God, and what has he done? He has removed his word. He has done that in order that people will come to their senses and return to him. But what do we see? As churches roll out rainbow flags and roll over on all kinds of issues, rather than repenting, the Lord closes their doors.

[ 15 : 29 ] Those buildings make lovely apartments and stunning office blocks. Even among Bible-believing churches that don't embrace the cultural madness, there's hardly any appetite to trust the regular means of grace that God has instituted as the solution to this problem. God has told his church what we are to do. We're to gather each Lord's Day. We're to commit ourselves to prayer, to preaching of his word, and to practicing his sacraments. Instead, what do we have? We have ministers apologizing for what the Bible says and trying to explain away the bits of the Bible that our culture hates.

I've listened recently to several interviews with evangelical ministers who are having consultations and seminars and conferences to get their heads together about the state of the church in our day. They look out, they see how weak we are, and they think, right, let's have a seminar. That's the answer. What we need to do is get everybody together and have a conference. And out of the conferences, well, we're told the problem we have in the church in our day is sermon application. Services, they're not warm enough, they're not deep enough. We've got a lack of sacrificial leaders. We're preaching the wrong way. We need to tweak and change the way we preach. Now, could we improve in these areas? No doubt. But these are like fiddling with the dimmer switch when the

power has been cut.

Doesn't seem to be working. We need to reconnect the power supply. And we do that by repenting of our sin as a church on behalf of the nation and returning to God on his means of grace.

[17:18] In the midst of this famine of righteousness, there is talk of a quiet revival going on in Britain. If that is the case, it is through churches that are committed to these things.

That's at a national level. Well, at a personal level. Now, this isn't about moving house or even moving country. Just because Elimelech moved, don't think you can't move house or go to another land.

That's not the point. Elimelech leaving the land of promise was him leaving God and his people. But we do see the spirit of Elimelech when we think that Moab will deliver the good life.

Now, whether that is because things are actually hard, as they were for Elimelech and his family, or because we haven't been given the life that we really want. You know, life isn't awful, but it's just not amazing. It's just not like that person's social media. Because we don't have what they have, we choose to walk away from God. We choose to turn our back on what His Word says, and so we calibrate our lives to a different standard.

We see this every time God puts something difficult in our lives, and we tell ourselves that the answer is found in disobedience. Of course, we don't couch it that way, but that is what is going on. So, the difficulty is loneliness. And we choose the online madness of porn or Tinder or something like that. The difficulty is no relationship, no spouse. That's what we desperately want, and so we choose to get involved with a non-Christian. The difficulty is that we don't fit in. Boys and girls, teenagers, you feel this pressure. You think, I'm desperately, desperately keen to fit in, and because I'm a Christian, I don't fit in, but I'm going to fit in. And so, we choose to follow the crowd, even if that leads us into sin. The difficulty, well, there's no sport on a Saturday for my children, so we choose Sunday sport over Sabbath. There might not even be any difficulty. If we're honest with ourselves, it's just that in our heart of hearts, we prefer Moab. We prefer what Chemosh has to offer. We're happy, of course, to take the name Christian, but Christ stays at the periphery of our lives, and we have our real God at the center. We're so ambitious that we sacrifice our family on the altar of career success. We plan our life. We choose where we live. We do those things on the basis of status or comfort, not where there's a good church that we can join and serve. We prefer what Moab has to offer, and so we go that way, trying, as it were, to bring God with us along the way.

[20:12] God says, here's what is required of you. Here's what calling yourself Christian means, and you follow along this path, and you say, yes, I see that, and I understand that, but I'm going to do it this way. You can't do that. And the rest of our passage shows us in the starkest terms what happens when we do choose to do this. The darkness only gets worse.

If he starts with history, he points to the irony. The third thing we see is tragedy. Verse 3. Can you see verse 3? But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives. The name of one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about 10 years, and both Malan and Kilian died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

God's name is left out of this prologue to symbolize how these people had left him out of their lives, and this tragedy is where a life lived in that way ultimately ends up.

Elimelech dies. His sons who had followed their father's example by taking Moabite wives, they die as well. As I said earlier, this leaves Naomi without a name. She's just the woman, and in that culture, without any means of provision. She is all but wiped out. No bread, no home, no heir, no future, no hope.

The security, the protection that Elimelech sought may have been there when he first arrived in Moab. You think about the prodigal son. Luke 15, the prodigal son runs away from his father, and we're told that he spent the start of his time away from the father with all the money the father had given living it up. When Elimelech first arrived in Moab, everything may have seemed great.

[22:12] Plenty of food. Left that famine behind. Things are good, aren't they? Sometimes when we choose to turn away from God, initially it can feel like freedom. It can feel like the prodigal. It's exhilarating even. We think, that was a good decision.

When I take all things together, my life is actually better now. I can do whatever I want. I'm not being restrained in any way. Or in the case where we've chosen compromise, and that compromise has actually delivered the thing that we really wanted in our heart of hearts, it can be framed that

God has blessed us.

I've known people who have made life decisions that are straight up, plainly detrimental to their souls. And as they've shown me around their vast house, they've said, we are so blessed. God has been so good to us. And within two, three, four, five years, they are spiritually empty.

These verses are a picture of that kind of tragedy. In the end, everything that Elimelech sought was to have denied Him. And His sinful choices brought disaster on the whole family. Oh, by the way, don't miss this, husbands, fathers. Your sin has consequences beyond yourself. As the head of your family, the effect of your choices reaches beyond you. Don't think that your sin is private. It always has a knock-on effect all the way out and all the way down. That's true. The other way as well, your righteousness also has a positive effect. Your good choices also trickle down as well. But this is the context here. We all of us, not just husbands and fathers, need to see where the decision to walk away from God leads. When you turn your back on Him, whether that's decisively or you say, right, I'm done, I'm out of here, or through compromise, or if we're going to take that charitable read on Elimelech, thinking we know what we're doing here. This is a clever move that I think I can fix this problem myself. If it's that kind of way, it doesn't matter. The end is tragic. We all die. That's what our physical death is. All of us die physically, but our physical death is not just a biological thing. It is a moral thing. It is a picture of the spiritual death that comes when we do what Elimelech did here, what his sons did, and walk away from the one who is the source of life. That's what happens when we walk away from the one who, if we cling to and trust, if we do what He says, even in the darkest times,

He will bring us life. Life that is truly life. Life that is marked by eternity. Life that makes your physical death just like going to sleep. By verse 5, look again, Naomi is almost wiped out, but that almost is the hope that we are left with. Even in this awful picture of darkness, there is a glimpse of hope that God is going to turn things around. The story has a way to go. It doesn't stop at verse 5. You've got a foretaste of it in reading the whole chapter this morning. The reality is that where you are tempted to walk away from God, or you have done so, and you are here this morning because you're being polite to somebody, or you don't want others to realize what's really going on in your heart, or you find yourself empty like Naomi, go back. Go back.

[ 25 : 45 ] We leave Naomi in misery this week, but that's because she doesn't yet know what we do, that her descendant has made a way for rebels to be reconciled.

Said at the start in this story, the names are important. Well, Naomi's descendant's name is Jesus, which means God saves. And because Jesus died, and because Jesus was raised, you can be welcomed by a Father who is always good, always loving, always ready to cover your sin and feed you with the bread of life. Now, whether you need to this morning come to Him for the first time, or return to Him from your own wandering, your story doesn't need to end like a limelight's.

No one's does. Whatever you're going through, whatever difficulties and struggles you have, and the pressure in some cases may feel completely unbearable. Whatever it is you feel pulling you away, the draw to go away from Christ, whatever those things are, the alternative does not compare to Jesus.

He is the only one who gives us a new name, gives us a glorious future, gives us an eternal hope, because He lived, He died, He rose, He ascended back to the Father, He is ruling and reigning now.

And if you go to Him, He will hold you. And if you resolve today that you won't go anywhere else, you don't need to end like a limelight. Go to Jesus. Go always to Jesus. Trust Him, and don't go anywhere else. Let's pray.

[ 27 : 48 ] Amen.