

PRELUDE

Ruth and Esther are the only women in the Old Testament who have entire books devoted to them. The book of Ruth tells the story of a Gentile who married a Jew and became an ancestress of the Messiah (Matt. 1:5). The book of Esther introduces us to a Jewess who married a Gentile and was used of God to save the Jewish nation from destruction so that the Messiah could be born.

The story of Ruth begins with a famine and ends with the birth of a baby, while the story of Esther begins with a feast and ends with the death of over seventy-five thousand people. God is mentioned twenty-five times in the book of Ruth, but He is not named even once in all the book of Esther! Yet in both books, the will of God is fulfilled, and the providential hand of God is clearly seen.

Why do we bring these two women together in this study? Because, in spite of their different backgrounds and experiences, *both Ruth and Esther were committed to do the will of God*. Ruth's reply to Naomi (Ruth 1:16–17) is one of the great confessions of faith found in Scripture, and Esther's reply to Mordecai (Est. 4:16) reveals a woman willing to lay down her life to save

her people. Ruth and Esther both summon Christians today to be committed to Jesus Christ and to do His will at any cost.

It has well been said that faith is not believing in spite of evidence but obeying in spite of consequence. Ruth and Esther point the way to that kind of dynamic and exciting faith, and we do well to follow their examples.

A SUGGESTED OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF RUTH

Theme: God providentially guides and blesses all who trust Him

Theme verse: Ruth 2:12

I. Sorrow: Ruth Weeping (Ruth 1)

1. Naomi tries to run from her problems (Ruth 1:1–5)
2. Naomi tries to cover up her mistakes (Ruth 1:6–18)
3. Naomi gets bitter against God (Ruth 1:19–22)

II. Service: Ruth Working (Ruth 2)

1. A new beginning—faith (Ruth 2:1–3)
2. A new friend—love (Ruth 2:4–16)
3. A new attitude—hope (Ruth 2:17–23)

III. Submission: Ruth Waiting (Ruth 3)

1. Ruth presents herself to Boaz (Ruth 3:1–7)
2. Ruth is accepted by Boaz (Ruth 3:8–15)
3. Ruth waits for Boaz to act (Ruth 3:16–18)

IV. Satisfaction: Ruth Wedding (Ruth 4)

1. Boaz redeems Ruth (Ruth 4:1–10)
2. The people bless Ruth (Ruth 4:11–12)
3. God gives Boaz and Ruth a son (Ruth 4:13–22)

YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY

(Ruth 1)

*(In which a family makes a bad decision and
exchanges one famine for three funerals)*

The efforts we make to escape from our destiny only serve to lead us into it.”

The American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that in his book *The Conduct of Life*, and it’s just as true today as when the book was published back in 1860. Because God gave us freedom of choice, we can ignore the will of God, argue with it, disobey it, even fight against it. But in the end, the will of God shall prevail, because “the counsel of the LORD stands forever” (Ps. 33:11) and “He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth” (Dan. 4:35 NKJV).

The patriarch Job asked, “Who has hardened himself against Him and prospered?” (Job 9:4 NKJV). Job knew the answer and so do we: *nobody*. If we obey God’s will, everything in life holds together; but if we disobey, everything starts to fall apart. Nowhere in the Bible is this truth better illustrated than in the experiences of Elimelech and his wife, Naomi.

We see in this chapter three mistakes that we must avoid as we deal with the problems and trials of life.

1. UNBELIEF: TRYING TO RUN FROM OUR PROBLEMS (1:1–5)

The time. Life was not easy in those days, for during the period of the judges, “there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; and see 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The book of Judges is the story of Israel at one of its lowest points in history—it’s a record of division, cruelty, apostasy, civil war, and national disgrace. Spiritually, our lives resemble elements of the book of Judges, for there is no king in Israel, and there will not be until Jesus returns. Like Israel in the past, many of God’s people today are living in unbelief and disobedience and are not enjoying the blessings of God.

It seems incredible that this beautiful love story should take place at such a calamitous period in the nation’s history, but is this not true today? Today we experience national and international perplexities, moral decay, and difficulties of every kind, and yet God loves this lost world and is seeking for a bride. In spite of alarms in the headlines and dangers on the streets, we can be sure that God still loves the world and wants to save lost sinners. When you know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, no matter how tough the times may be, you are part of a beautiful love story.

But the book of Ruth is a *harvest* story as well as a *love* story. During this dark time in Israel’s history, God was seeking a bride and *reaping a harvest*. To be sure, Israel was reaping the harvest of their disobedience (Gal. 6:7); but God was producing the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of Ruth and Naomi. Today, the Lord is seeking a harvest and calls us to share in His labors (John 4:34–38). The harvest today is white and ready, but the laborers are still few (Luke 10:2).

The place. How strange that there should be a famine in Bethlehem, which means “house of bread”! In the Old Testament, a famine was often an evidence of God’s discipline because His people had sinned against Him (Lev. 26:18–20; Deut. 28:15, 23–24). During the time of the judges, Israel

repeatedly turned from God and worshipped the idols of the heathen nations around them, and God had to discipline them (Judg. 2:10–19). The godly had to suffer because of the ungodly, even in Bethlehem.

The decision. When trouble comes to our lives, we can do one of three things: endure it, escape it, or enlist it. If we only endure our trials, then trials become our master, and we have a tendency to become hard and bitter. If we try to escape our trials, then we will probably miss the purposes God wants to achieve in our lives. But if we learn to enlist our trials, they will become our servants instead of our masters and work for us; and God will work all things together for our good and His glory (Rom. 8:28).

Elimelech made the wrong decision when he decided to leave home. What made this decision so wrong?

He walked by sight and not by faith. Abraham made the same mistake when he encountered a famine in the Land of Promise (Gen. 12:10ff.). Instead of waiting for God to tell him what to do next, he fled to Egypt and got into trouble. No matter how difficult our circumstances may be, the safest and best place is in the will of God. It's easy to say with David, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest" (Ps. 55:6). But it's wiser to claim the promise of Isaiah 40:31 and wait on the Lord for "wings like eagles" and by faith soar above the storms of life. *You can't run away from your problems.*

How do you walk by faith? By claiming the promises of God and obeying the Word of God, in spite of what you see, how you feel, or what may happen. It means committing yourself to the Lord and relying wholly on Him to meet the need. When we live by faith, it glorifies God, witnesses to a lost world, and builds Christian character into our lives. God has ordained that "the righteous will live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38; 2 Cor. 5:7); and when we refuse to trust Him, we are calling God a liar and dishonoring Him.

There is a wisdom of this world that leads to folly and sorrow, and there is a wisdom from God that seems folly to the world but that leads to blessing (1 Cor. 3:18–20; James 3:13–18). “Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!” (Isa. 5:21 KJV).

He majored on the physical and not the spiritual. A husband and father certainly wants to provide for his wife and family, but he must not do it at the expense of losing the blessing of God. When Satan met Jesus in the wilderness, his first temptation was to suggest that Christ satisfy His hunger rather than please His Father (Matt. 4:1–4; see John 4:34). One of the Devil’s pet lies is: “You do have to live!” But it is *in God* that “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28 NIV), and He is able to take care of us.

David’s witness is worth considering: “I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendants begging bread” (Ps. 37:25). As Paul faced a threatening future, he testified, “But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself” (Acts 20:24 KJV). In times of difficulty, if we die to self and put God’s will first (Matt. 6:33), we can be sure that He will either take us out of the trouble or bring us through.

He honored the enemy and not the Lord. By going fifty miles to the neighboring land of Moab, Elimelech and his family abandoned God’s land and God’s people for the land and people of the enemy. The Moabites were descendants of Lot from his incestuous union with his firstborn daughter (Gen. 19:30–38), and they were the Jews’ enemies because of the way they had treated Israel during their pilgrim journey from Egypt to Canaan (Deut. 23:3–6; Num. 22—25). During the time of the judges, Moab had invaded Israel and ruled over the people for eighteen years (Judg. 3:12–14); so why should Elimelech turn to them for help? They were a proud people (Isa. 16:6) whom God disdained.

“Moab is my washpot,” said the Lord (Ps. 60:8 κῆν), a picture of a humiliated nation washing the feet of the conquering soldiers.

The consequences. The name Elimelech means “my God is king.” But the Lord was *not* king in Elimelech’s life, for he left God completely out of his decisions. He made a decision out of God’s will when he went to Moab, and this led to another bad decision when his two sons married women of Moab. Mahlon married Ruth (Ruth 4:10), and Chilion married Orpah. Jews were forbidden to marry Gentile women, especially those from Ammon and Moab (Deut. 7:1–11; 23:3–6; Neh. 13:1–3; Ezra 9:1–4). It was the Moabite women in Moses’ day who seduced the Jewish men into immorality and idolatry, and as a result, twenty-four thousand people died (Num. 25).

Elimelech and his family had fled Judah to escape death, but the three men met death just the same. The family had planned only to “sojourn” temporarily in Moab, but they remained for ten years (Ruth 1:4). At the end of that decade of disobedience, all that remained were three lonely widows and three Jewish graves in a heathen land. Everything else was gone (v. 21). Such is the sad consequence of unbelief.

We can’t run away from our problems. We can’t avoid taking with us the basic cause of most of our problems, which is an unbelieving and disobedient heart. “The majority of us begin with the bigger problems outside and forget the one inside,” wrote Oswald Chambers. “A man has to learn ‘the plague of his own heart’ before his own problems can be solved” (*The Shadow of an Agony*, 76).

2. DECEPTION: TRYING TO HIDE OUR MISTAKES (1:6–18)

We need to consider the three testimonies that are in this section.

The testimony of Naomi (vv. 6–15). God visited His faithful people in Bethlehem, but not His disobedient daughter in Moab. Naomi heard the report that the famine had ended, and when she heard the good news,

she decided to return home. There is always “bread enough and to spare” when you are in the Father’s will (Luke 15:17 κϲν). How sad it is when people only *hear* about God’s blessing, but never experience it, because they are not in the place where God can bless them.

Many years ago, I was in a prayer meeting with a number of Youth for Christ leaders, among them Jacob Stam, brother of John Stam, who, with his wife, Betty, was martyred in China in 1934. We had been asking God to bless this ministry and that project, and I suppose the word “bless” was used scores of times as we prayed. Then Jacob Stam prayed, “Lord, we’ve asked You to bless all these things; but, please, Lord, *make us blessable*.” Had Naomi been in that meeting, she would have had to confess, “Lord, I’m not blessable.”

Whenever we have disobeyed the Lord and departed from His will, we must confess our sin and return to the place of blessing. Abraham had to leave Egypt and go back to the altar he had abandoned (Gen. 13:1–4), and Jacob had to go back to Bethel (35:1). The repeated plea of the prophets to God’s people was that they *turn* from their sins and *return* to the Lord. “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and he will have compassion on him and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7).

Naomi’s decision was right, but her motive was wrong. She was still interested primarily in food, not in fellowship with God. You don’t hear her confessing her sins to God and asking Him to forgive her. She was returning to her land but not to her Lord.

But something else was wrong in the way Naomi handled this decision: *She did not want her two daughters-in-law to go with her*. If it was right for Naomi to go to Bethlehem, where the true and living God was worshipped, then it was right for Orpah and Ruth to accompany her. Naomi should have said to them what Moses said to his father-in-law, “Come thou

with us, and we will do thee good: for the LORD hath spoken good concerning Israel” (Num. 10:29 KJV). Instead, Naomi tried to influence the two women to go back to their families and their false gods.

Why would a believing Jewess, a daughter of Abraham, encourage two pagan women to worship false gods? I may be wrong, but I get the impression that Naomi didn't want to take Orpah and Ruth to Bethlehem *because they were living proof that she and her husband had permitted their two sons to marry women from outside the covenant nation*. In other words, Naomi was trying to cover up her disobedience. If she returned to Bethlehem alone, nobody would know that the family had broken the law of Moses.

“He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy” (Prov. 28:13 NKJV). When we try to cover our sins, it's proof that we really haven't faced them honestly and judged them according to God's Word. True repentance involves honest confession and a brokenness within. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). Instead of brokenness, Naomi had bitterness.

The tragedy is that Naomi did not present the God of Israel in a positive way. In Ruth 1:13, she suggests that God was to blame for the sorrow and pain the three women had experienced. “It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!” (v. 13 NIV). In other words, “I'm to blame for all our trials, so why remain with me? Who knows what the Lord may do to me next?” Had Naomi been walking with the Lord, she could have won Orpah to the faith and brought two trophies of grace home to Bethlehem.

The testimony of Orpah (vv. 11–14). The two daughters-in-law started off with Naomi (v. 7), but she stopped them and urged them not to accompany her. She even prayed for them (vv. 8–9) that the Lord would be kind to them and find them new husbands and give them rest after all their

sorrow. But of what value are the prayers of a backslid believer (Ps. 66:18)? Three times Naomi told Orpah and Ruth to return (Ruth 1:8, 11–12).

When she saw them hesitating, Naomi began to reason with them. “I’m too old to have another husband and bear another family,” she said. “And even if I could bear more sons, do you want to waste these next years waiting for them to grow up? You could be in your mother’s house, with your family, enjoying life.”

Orpah was the weaker of the two sisters-in-law. She started to Bethlehem with Naomi, kissed her, and wept with her; yet she would not stay with her. She was “not far from the kingdom” (Mark 12:34 NIV), but she made the wrong decision and turned back. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but we wonder whether her heart was really in it, for her decision proved that her heart was back home where she hoped to find a husband. Orpah left the scene and is never mentioned again in the Scriptures.

The testimony of Ruth (vv. 15–18). Naomi was trying to cover up, Orpah had given up, but Ruth was prepared to stand up! She refused to listen to her mother-in-law’s pleas or follow her sister-in-law’s bad example. Why? *Because she had come to trust in the God of Israel* (2:12). She had experienced trials and disappointments, but instead of blaming God, she had trusted Him and was not ashamed to confess her faith. In spite of the bad example of her disobedient in-laws, Ruth had come to know the true and living God, and she wanted to be with His people and dwell in His land.

Ruth’s conversion is evidence of the sovereign grace of God, for the only way sinners can be saved is by grace (Eph. 2:8–10). Everything within her and around her presented obstacles to her faith, and yet she trusted the God of Israel. Her background was against her, for she was from Moab where they worshipped the god Chemosh (Num. 21:29; 1 Kings 11:7, 33), who accepted human sacrifices (2 Kings 3:26–27) and encouraged immorality (Num. 25). Her circumstances were against her

and could have made her bitter against the God of Israel. First, her father-in-law died, and then her husband and her brother-in-law, and she was left a widow without any support. If this is the way Jehovah God treats His people, why follow Him?

Ruth dearly loved her mother-in-law, but even Naomi was against her, for she urged Ruth to return to her family and her gods in Moab. Since Elimelech and Mahlon were now dead, Ruth was technically under the guardianship of Naomi, and she should have obeyed her mother-in-law's counsel. But God intervened and graciously saved Ruth in spite of all these obstacles. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5 NKJV). God delights in showing mercy (Mic. 7:18), and often He shows His mercy to the least likely people in the least likely places. This is the sovereign grace of the God "who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4 KJV).

Ruth's statement in Ruth 1:16–17 is one of the most magnificent confessions found anywhere in Scripture. First, she confessed her love for Naomi and her desire to stay with her mother-in-law even unto death. Then she confessed her faith in the true and living God and her decision to worship Him alone. She was willing to forsake father and mother (2:11) in order to cleave to Naomi and the God of her people. Ruth was steadfastly "determined" to accompany Naomi (1:18) and live in Bethlehem with God's covenant people.

But there was a divine law that said, "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD forever" (Deut. 23:3 NKJV). This meant permanent exclusion. How then could Ruth enter into the congregation of the Lord? By trusting God's grace and throwing herself completely on His mercy. Law excludes us from God's family, but grace includes us if we put our faith in Christ.

When you read the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew 1, you find the names of five women, four of whom have very questionable credentials: Tamar committed incest with her father-in-law (Gen. 38); Rahab was a Gentile harlot (Josh. 2:1); Ruth was an outcast Gentile Moabitess (Ruth 1:4–5); and “the wife of Uriah” was an adulteress (2 Sam. 11:2–4). How did they ever become a part of the family of the Messiah? Through the sovereign grace and mercy of God! God is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV). (Mary is the fifth woman in the genealogy, and she was included because of God’s grace and her faith. See Luke 1:26–56.)

3. BITTERNESS: BLAMING GOD FOR OUR TRIALS (1:19–22)

The two widows probably visited the three graves of their loved ones for the last time before leaving Moab. Then they committed themselves to the Lord and set out to begin a new life. It would be interesting to know what Naomi and Ruth talked about as they journeyed from Moab to Bethlehem. Did Naomi give her daughter-in-law some basic instruction in the law of Moses? Did Ruth ask questions about the Jewish faith, the Jewish people, and her new home in Bethlehem? We wonder what kind of answers Naomi would have given since she was a bitter woman with a faltering faith in the God of Israel.

Naomi had been away from home for ten years, and the women of the town were shocked when they saw her. (In v. 19 KJV, the pronoun of “they said” is feminine.) Their question “Is this Naomi?” suggests both surprise and bewilderment. The name Naomi means “pleasant,” but she was not living up to her name. She was not the Naomi whom they had known a decade before. Her ten difficult years in Moab, and the sorrows they had brought, had taken their toll on Naomi’s appearance and personality. Instead of making her better, the trials of life had made her bitter, which is the meaning of the word *mara*.

We can't control the circumstances of life, but we can control how we respond to them. That's what faith is all about, daring to believe that God is working everything for our good even when we don't feel like it or see it happening. "In everything give thanks" (1 Thess. 5:18) isn't always easy to obey, but obeying this command is the best antidote against a bitter and critical spirit. The Scottish preacher George H. Morrison said, "Nine-tenths of our unhappiness is selfishness, and is an insult cast in the face of God." Because Naomi was imprisoned by selfishness, she was bitter against God.

To begin with, she accused the Lord of dealing very bitterly with her (Ruth 1:20). She had left Bethlehem with a husband and two sons and had come home without them. She had gone to Moab possessing the necessities of life, but now she had returned home having nothing. She was a woman with empty hands, an empty home, and an empty heart. Because she didn't surrender to the Lord and accept His loving chastening, she did not experience "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11).

Not only had the Lord dealt bitterly with her, but He had also testified against her in these afflictions (Ruth 1:21 *κῆρ*). Is this Naomi's confession of sin, her admission that she and her family had sinned in going to Moab? Is she hinting that they deserved all that they had suffered? Twice Naomi called God "the Almighty," which is the Hebrew name *El Shaddai*, "the All-powerful One" (vv. 20–21). It's one thing to *know* God's name and quite something else to *trust* that name and allow God to work in the difficult situations of life. "And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You" (Ps. 9:10 *ΝΚῬῬ*). Naomi knew the name but did not exercise the faith.

But was Naomi really that poor and empty? Or was she simply exaggerating her situation because she was weary of body and bitter of soul? Just think of the resources she had that should have encouraged her.