



Ruth 1
A Hollywood Love Story: Ruth
Making Good Choices

Rev. Brian North
October 30th, 2016

Today we begin a new series of messages that will come out of the book of Ruth. Ruth is one of two books in the Bible named after women, with Esther being the other. I've titled the series "A Hollywood Love Story" which, as a guy who loves action movies and football, was a very difficult thing for me to do. But it was hard to fit anything into the series title that had to do with the NFL or Star Wars or even the World Series; they just don't fit the book of Ruth. The fact is, the life of Ruth could probably be made into a Hollywood blockbuster of a movie not unlike other love stories such as Casablanca or Sleepless in Seattle. Now: while the story of the relationship of Ruth and Boaz takes center stage, it is clear throughout the book and in what comes in the centuries after because of their relationship, that God really is the star of the show – and in a way that neither Ruth nor Boaz nor anyone else in the events recorded for us could ever be. He's the director, Script-writer, producer, and more. The providential hand of God brings people together, and orchestrates events, even as people live in total freedom. And in the end, we see that the love story isn't just about human love between a man and a woman, but about God's love for them, and also for you and for me. It's the story of God's love, grace, providence, provision, and more, in our own lives.

So this morning we'll be in the opening chapter of the book of Ruth. You may want to follow along in your Bibles if you brought them, or in one of the Pew Bibles in front of you. Ruth is the 8th book of the Old Testament, so not too far in. The text will also be on the screen as always. This is God's Word to you and me today. **Ruth 1 Here.**

Now you may want to keep your Bibles open, or if you're on a Bible App you may want to keep that on, but let's make a deal that you stay on the Bible App and don't watch the Seahawks game, ok? So: **In the first 5 verses we have a decade of history.** The book of Ruth is a personal story that takes place during the time of the judges. This was before Israel was governed by kings, and instead governed by judges. A judge was not what we think of – sitting in a court room, wearing a robe, hearing cases from people. A judge in their day was essentially the highest-ranking military leader, and they often

stepped into leadership when the need arose, as opposed to being there 24/7 for 30 years like a King. And then oftentimes, when the need died down, the person would return back to what they were doing before – back to their hometown, their family, and their “profession.” So a judge wasn’t a lifetime leadership position, but a leader for a “season.” And the book of Judges (right before) is the macro view of life at the time, while Ruth gives us the micro view, it gives us a slice of life during the time of the judges.

We're also told in these verses that there's a famine in the land. We don't know if this is a famine because of a drought as we see in Genesis when Jacob went down to Egypt and his own son Joseph was there after his brothers had discarded him, or if this is a famine brought on by the invasion of another country. For example, in Judges 6, it's recorded that for seven years when the Israelites had crops come up, the Midianites would invade the land and destroy the produce and the livestock. It was sort of a human-induced famine. Given that the story of Ruth takes place in the time of the judges, it may be that it was this kind of famine that took place, but we don't know.

Regardless, Elimelech decides that he and his wife, Naomi, and their two sons need to leave the city of Bethlehem where they live. **It's ironic that Bethlehem means “House of Bread” and yet apparently they had very little.** Additionally, he came from a family that was prominent enough to mention by name – the Ephrathites – indicating that they had some status and probably were well-off. But, when hard times hit, everyone is impacted, and so to avoid the difficulties and perils of life during a famine, and probably in order to continue living a certain way, they move to Moab where food is plenty.

In theory this was probably intended as a temporary move, but it ends up being ten years. And in those ten years: **Even though they left so they could avoid struggle and continue living the good life, tragedy strikes.** First, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi without a husband. Next, both of her sons, who had married Ruth and Orpah who are non-Jewish, Moabite women, also die. This leaves Naomi with no immediate family, in a foreign country.

So: **In verses 6-10 we see Naomi deciding to go back to Israel, to the region of Judah, because things are better there now.** And as she gets a short ways out of town with her daughters-in-law going with her, she encourages Ruth and Orpah to turn back and remain there in Moab with their own mothers, and then find new husbands who will bless them. Now, I don't know what your in-law relationships are like for those of you who have them, especially mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships (which often seem to be the most difficult ones), but their's must have been awfully good, because the very thought of separating causes them all to burst into tears. Seems like most people cry at the thought of getting *together* with their in-laws and *rejoice* when they leave. But not here. These are not tears of joy. The daughters-in-law want to leave their homeland and go with Naomi to her homeland. But Naomi continues to reason with them about why they should go back.

She says to them, **“Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them?” (Ruth 1:11-13).** Here she references Jewish religious practice that if a woman's husband died and had no children, the next oldest brother was to marry the widow, and any forthcoming children would be considered the first husband's offspring and continue his family line. And so Naomi is saying, “Look, I'm not pregnant, I'm not even married, and I'm old enough I'm not likely to even marry again. And even if I was married and expecting a child tomorrow, would you wait for him to grow up and be old enough to marry one of you?” And the thought of that causes them all to cry once again. Eventually, Orpah comes around, sees the Naomi's reasoning, and decides to stay in Moab. Ruth, however, is a tougher nut to crack. Listen to her reply:

“Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death

separates you and me” (Ruth 1:16-17).

We're going to come back to this in a couple of minutes, but obviously, Ruth is committed to Naomi. It's a huge *statement* of faith, and a huge *step* of faith as a widowed non-Israelite going to Bethlehem. And Naomi realizes that Ruth means it, and so she gives in and lets Ruth tag along on this journey back to Bethlehem.

When they arrive, the townspeople are excited to see her. It's been 10 years since she left Bethlehem with her husband and two sons, and now she's returning without the men, but with one of her daughters-in-law. **And with her words “don't call me Naomi, but call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life bitter” (1:20) we see that Naomi is hurting.** She's been through a lot of pain and suffering, even though that was what they sought to avoid when they left Bethlehem 10 years earlier. She acknowledges that God has brought her through some hard times, but she continues in faith. And we'll continue to see more of that with chapter two next week. There is, however, one main thing I want to draw out of this first chapter for us to consider in our own lives, and that has to do with the choices we make.

We all face choices in life: Do I take this job or that job; live in this neighborhood or that neighborhood; do I go with windows, mac or android; hit the snooze button or just get out of bed; put the kids in time out, or spank them; Huskies or...well, there's really no choice there. But we all face choices in life. And there are two big choices that happen in this opening chapter. Both of them are made in freedom under the providence and sovereignty of God, with God working out his purposes through these choices and with huge ramifications on their lives and the lives of others. **The first choice is when Elimelech decided to leave Bethlehem with Naomi and their sons.**

Elimelech chose to leave Bethlehem because times were difficult. There's nothing in the text that judges this or encourages us to have a dogmatic response about whether or not his decision was a good one. There's no narrator's comment, no parenthetical aside, not even a simple adjective to

describe the decision as wise or unwise. But you have to wonder, in light of the difficult decade it was for the family in Moab— **“Was that such a wise choice to leave Bethlehem?”** He didn’t have to. It’s not like everyone “up and left” Jerusalem or the surrounding towns like Bethlehem. And several centuries earlier during another famine, as I mentioned briefly earlier, we read of Jacob heading down to Egypt – not to move there, but to get grain and other food supplies to bring back home. They stayed right where they were, then – close to home, close to family, close to those who would encourage them in their faith.

So here's a man whose very name (Elimelech) in Hebrew means, “God is my King,” and yet he's leaving his relatives, leaving his house of worship, leaving Bethlehem, a suburb of Jerusalem, which is the center of his Jewish faith, all because of the famine and because things have gotten difficult. I think we have to wonder what he valued more: God or the ease at which he lived life? Is God really his king or is he turning his back on God in this decision? I’m sure it felt like a step of faith to leave so much that was familiar. But maybe the *greater* step of faith would have been to stay with the people of God and persevere with them through the difficulties that they faced as a community, and to work through them together, rather than leave and end up facing so many of his own difficulties without their faith community to support them. There’s something noble and good and right about sticking together in partnership with the faith community that has nurtured you and encouraged you. But Elimelech seems to value something else.

And you have to realize that Moab was far from a spiritual hotbed for Judaism. So he’s not simply going to another place where they’re going to be encouraged in their faith. Moabites worshiped the god Chemosh and practiced human sacrifice as a part of their worship. It wasn’t exactly in step with the life-affirming God of the Bible. So this is not like one of us deciding that we need to move to Canada because the presidential vote goes one way or the other. There’s a lot more at play here. Now, the good news is that God works through our poor decisions. In spite of us, God will accomplish His purposes, and we’ll see that here in Ruth. But still, the choice he made is questionable.

Contrast that with the choice of Ruth. Her statement to Naomi is one of the grandest in all of the Bible, **“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me” (Ruth 1:16-17)**. Wow! I mean, that's huge! Notice she's making a difficult decision as well, but it's a decision that moves her closer to God and His people, not further away. She's choosing to leave her home and go to a whole new home, to Bethlehem, the “House of Bread.” A number of years ago I heard on a sports radio talk show a discussion about where you consider “home” to be. I think it was in the context of an athlete who signed a contract with the team in the town he grew up in, even though other teams had offered him more money. And I might have mentioned this before...it's really stuck with me, and it is maybe the most profound thing I've heard on sports talk radio. Actually, maybe the only profound thing I've heard on sports talk radio; which is why I listen to Christian radio as much as anything else. Anyway, the radio host said that he believed: **“Home” is where you'd like to be buried**. That's where your heart really is. No matter where you live at any given time: the city or town or region where you'd like to be buried after you die is really home for you. I think he's right. I mean, I'd love to live on the beach in Hawaii or in Whistler some day...but where I want to be buried is here on the Eastside, or somewhere in the greater Puget Sound region. This is home for me, no matter where I may be living.

Ruth is showing that “home” for her is with the Lord's people, and the hub of her Jewish faith, and she wants to be near Jerusalem. She'd rather be buried in the homeland of her mother-in-law, even buried next to her (how many daughters-in-law can say *that*, right?)...She'd rather that, than be buried in her own homeland and with her blood relatives. This faith that she came into through marriage is not just a borrowed faith anymore, it's her own. She has made the conscientious choice to take ownership for her faith, “your God will be my God” she says to Naomi...she's made the conscientious decision to be with the people who planted seeds of faith, who encouraged her in her faith, to stay surrounded by people who would help her in her walk with God. Do we make that same choice?

When we're faced with a choice and the options are laid out before us, do we make the choice that's going to glorify God, that's going to encourage us in our faith, that's going to lead us into holy living, that's going to strengthen the community of the saints? The godly choice, the one that God is calling and leading us into, may not be the easy one. Maybe it's taking the job that doesn't pay as well but lets you be with your family more; maybe it's not keeping up with the Jones's when it comes to your home or the car you drive or the vacation you take so that you can support the church and help build the kingdom by participating in a mission trip or giving financially more generously than you would otherwise be able to. Maybe it's stepping out in faith to lead a small group, or participate in a class, or spearhead some other ministry at the church or regularly serve at the food bank instead of spending more time in front of a screen. And that's not to say we should have no television or computers or any down time...but it's easy to ignore God's call upon us in the choices we face. **The right choice, the one God is calling you to make, may not be the easy one. But the right choice will always be the one that brings honor and glory to God.** It will be the one that stretches you, that causes you to trust Him more, that encourages someone in their faith, and that will ultimately build you up and transform you as well.

Over 1,000 years after the events of Ruth's life, Jesus walked the face of the earth. There's a strong connection between Ruth and Jesus, which we'll explore more as we go through this series. But a little over 1,000 years later Jesus was faced with the choice of following his Heavenly Father's calling upon him, or to go his own way. He chose the narrow path, the more difficult way, that led to the cross. There was nothing easy about that choice. But it's had a profound impact on the world, more so than any choice that anyone else has ever had. You and I are here today because Jesus chose the cross 2,000 years ago. That was not the easy way to go.

I pray that the choices you and I face this week would be made like Ruth's, and like Jesus' and move us closer to God...move us deeper into community and communion with His people...and move us deeper into His mission and calling upon us to shine the light of Christ for all the world to see. Even if

they're not the easy choices, they are the right choices to make. Let's pray...Amen.