



### **Ruth 1—Tragedy**

We are just past mid-summer and I am guessing that most of you have taken in one of the summer blockbuster movies. Just like retailers are dependent on the Christmas season to make money, so is Hollywood dependent on summer blockbusters to make loads of cash. In order to create a blockbuster film, you have to have most, if not all, of the following ingredients: death, disaster, suspense, love story, aliens, superheroes. Whatever summer movie is your favorite, I guarantee you that it has most of these ingredients. It just so happens that we have our own summer blockbuster in the Old Testament book of Ruth. (I know I announced last week that I was going to start the book of Romans next, but I changed my mind.)

Ruth has all of these blockbuster ingredients.

- Death—3 people die in the first five verses
- Disaster—the book opens with a natural disaster—a famine descends upon the land of Israel
- Suspense—once you know the story well you will see that the entire book is one big cliffhanger. If you read it from the perspective of the characters, you never know what's going to happen next. The author is a master storyteller.
- Love story—as you probably know the story ends with a marriage but there are multiple love stories embedded in this wonderful book.
- Aliens—even though there are no little green aliens from outer space, the main character, Ruth, is an alien from a foreign country. (OK, I admit, this one is a stretch!)
- Superheroes—Superman, Batman and Spiderman don't make an appearance, but God—Yahweh—is the real superhero. He is the all-powerful hero, making sure the story turns out as it should.

This story truly does have something for everyone and I trust that you will enjoy watching the drama play out before you in full color.

*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, he and his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, 5 and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.*

*6 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. 7 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. 8 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. 9 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. 10 And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” 11 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? 12 **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, 13 would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*

*15 And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; **return** after your sister-in-law.” 16 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 God my God. 17 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.” 18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.*

*19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” 20 She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 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?”*

*22 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 intersection of tragedy and providence**

As you can see, the main theme or big idea of the book is this: *From Tragedy to Redemption through Powerful Providence*. The story begins with all out tragedy and resolves in chapter four with full redemption. This is the overall theme of the book and each chapter has its own theme.

Chapter one—Tragedy

Chapter two—Hope

Chapter three—Faith

Chapter four—Redemption

So this is what I mean by going from tragedy to redemption. Chapter one begins with multiple tragedies and in chapter four we will see the conclusion of full redemption. And all along the way, there is a quiet but powerful providence of God directing each event and each step of the way. Therefore, we have our theme: *From Tragedy to Redemption through Powerful Providence*.

So the first thing we need to see is the intersection of tragedy and providence. In other words, in what sense is God providentially guiding these tragedies or are they random events and the only thing the characters can do is to respond appropriately? Do you see the difference between the two options? Chuck Swindoll has a very helpful quote. He has said that “Life is 10% what you make it and 90% how you take it.” Therefore, we may not be able to control the circumstances in life but we can control how we respond to them. This is what we might call the “non-providence” position. It’s not that such people do not believe in God’s sovereignty but their understanding of sovereignty does not encompass a full and all-powerful providence.

That’s good, sound advice that can be applied to all facets of life. For example, let’s say that there is a really annoying person at your job. (That could never happen, right? Let’s just hope other people don’t think that person is YOU!) The person has been there for ten years and there’s not much chance that he will be fired so you just have to find a way to deal. You can’t change the other person but you can change yourself. That’s just one of endless ways to apply the phrase “Life is 10% what you make it and 90% how you take it.” It can also be applied to more difficult situations, even tragic situations. Life is hard and bad things will happen but what matters is how you deal with it and how you work through it.

Again, that’s good advice but it’s not necessarily Christian advice. But this is the way many people read the Bible. Take the example of the famine in Israel. Famines fit under the category of natural disasters and there’s nothing you can do about those, right? All that remained for Naomi and her family was to trust God and respond to the situation as best as possible. Joseph is another good example. He found himself in the most extreme situations but his upstanding character always won the day. We can’t control things like famines or what happens when your ten brothers sell you into slavery, what remains for us is to respond with trust and faithfulness in all things. Obviously, our response to such things IS vitally important and half of the equation but if all we have is our response and God is not fully in control, then we are in real trouble.

I think such an attitude is dead wrong and I’ll tell you why in a minute, but let me give you the proof text for Christians who think this way. *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing* (James 1:2-4). We know and love this verse, though we don’t always find it easy to count trials and suffering as joy. But the reason we can do so is because our trials and testing of our faith will result in something good for us. If we respond with trust, our faith will grow and mature as a result. We will be made *perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*. So trials are kind of like exercising—we may not enjoy sweat and sore muscles but the end result is good for us.

It is true that the end result is good for us but this kind of thinking completely misses the Biblical teaching on trials. What I mean is that if God is not in control of our trials and suffering, if tragedies like famines are outside of his control, then we really are in a heap of trouble.

Take Romans 8:28 for example, which is another favorite verse we use in times of trial. *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* In other words, all of our suffering and trials work together for good, but how does this happen? If God cannot control a famine or ten evil brothers or the death of a husband and two sons, then how can he make all of these things work together for good? The obvious answer is that he cannot. If he is not sovereign over famines and death, then we are the most foolish of all people to think that anything good can come out of bad things. We are no better off than a statement I heard recently from an atheist, who said, “If there is a God, then we are ants and he is holding a magnifying glass.” This man looked around at all of the evil and random suffering in the world and decided that God, if he exists, must enjoy causing us trouble because he doesn’t seem to want to make the evil go away.

Verse six is a key to understanding the famine. *6 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.* This is the first time the Lord’s name is used in the book of Ruth, specifically the name Yahweh. Yahweh was given credit for giving food to the Israelite people. So here’s the question: if Yahweh can control the end of a famine then is he not also in control of the start of a famine? How about the Egyptian famine in the time of Joseph? Was God in control of that famine? God predicted that the years of abundance would last exactly seven years—and they did—and he predicted that the famine would last exactly seven years—and it did.

Indeed, all throughout Scripture God shows again and again that he is in control of crop production and other things which we put into the category of the natural realm, or in the case of a famine, a natural disaster. We have no problem giving God credit for ending famines and the like but we tend to get a little squirmish when talking about him causing the famine in the first place. But again, if he can’t control the start of a famine than he can’t control the end of one either.

Do you see why it is so important that we answer this question? It is a vital question because either God is fully in control of life or he is not. If he’s not in control then he can’t make all things work together for good. If he’s not in control, then even if he isn’t gaining some twisted pleasure by frying us with a magnifying glass, then he is still powerless to help us. If he is powerless to help us then all of our suffering is meaningless. Why pray?

The British preacher Charles Spurgeon described the power of God like this:

I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes—that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens—that the chaff from the hand of the winnow is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the

rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence—the fall of sere leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche. He that believes in a God must believe this truth. There is no standing point between this and atheism. There is no halfway between a mighty God that worketh all things by the sovereign counsel of his will and no God at all. A God that can not do as he pleases—a God who is frustrated, is not a God, and can not be a God.

He could not conceive of a God that did not have sovereign control over absolutely everything. But beyond what Spurgeon thought about it, we need to dig some more into this story. It's easy to see what Naomi thought of her circumstances as she tells us multiple times. Her first statement is found in verse thirteen: *it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.*<sup>1</sup> That is what she told Ruth and Orpah but listen to what she told her old friends back in Bethlehem.

*20 She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 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?”*

Interestingly, her lament is in the form of Hebrew poetry. You can really see it when you use the Hebrew names for God. It takes the ABBA form of Hebrew parallelism where the two “A” lines are parallel in thought and the two “B” lines are parallel in thought.

A *Shaddai* has dealt bitterly with me  
B *Yahweh* has brought me back empty  
B *Yahweh* has testified against me  
A *Shaddai* has brought calamity upon me

Not only is this classic Hebrew poetry but it also perfectly fits the format of a lament that is so common in the Psalms. Someone told me that 2/3 of the Psalms are laments. Even if that number is a bit high, we know that the various psalm writers often pour out their hearts to the Lord. And it's good to do this. The Lord loves broken and contrite hearts who pour out their pain and sorrow to Him. He wants us to run to the throne to receive mercy and grace to help in our time of need. Naomi is clearly sorrowful after having lost her husband and two sons and having run from a ten year famine in her own country. She was sad but was it wrong of her to, in a sense, cast blame upon the Lord? Read those four lines again.

*Shaddai* has dealt bitterly with me  
*Yahweh* has brought me back empty  
*Yahweh* has testified against me  
*Shaddai* has brought calamity upon me

The last line is probably worded the strongest. The Lord has brought calamity on me? Naomi really believed that the Lord had done these things to her—not just the famine but the other tragedies as well. What we have to keep in mind in such cases is that not everything that comes out of the mouths of Bible characters is necessarily right and correct theology. In his log lament,

Job said many things that were right on but he also said some wrong things because he later repented of them. So is that what happened with Naomi? She had a right to be sad but she did not have a right to blame God for bringing calamity upon her? Personally, I believe that Naomi was exactly correct in what she said. There may have been too much despair and not enough faith in her heart but what she said was sound theology.

Let me show you from some other Scriptures.

*I form light and create darkness,  
I make well-being and create calamity,  
I am the LORD, who does all these things.* (Isaiah 45:7)

There it is as plain as day—God creates or causes calamity. If you are like me, that makes me squirm just a bit, especially when you read this verse in the KJV—*I make peace, and create evil.* Before I talk about that word “evil,” let me give you another verse from Amos 3:6. *Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?* The word disaster is the same Hebrew word as calamity. All of these words come from the exact same Hebrew word.

Here is a definition of the word.

**be bad**, be evil, do wrong, do harm, i.e., be in a state or do an action which is not morally good (as an opposite or perversion of goodness), so with an implication that the event or action is harmful in various; **do wickedness**; **be distressed**, be disturbed, be miserable, i.e., have a feeling or attitude of anxiety or distress; **suffer harm**; **have trouble**, have calamity, be in ruin, have misfortune, i.e., have hardship in some circumstance; **bring trouble**, mistreat, bring disaster, i.e., cause hardship in some circumstance.<sup>2</sup>

Now absolutely know from all of Scripture that God cannot and does not do evil. No other translation since the older KJV uses the word evil in this verse. The KJV also translated the word in Amos 3:6 as evil. And from looking at the definition you can see why. The vast majority of the times it literally means evil as in the absence or opposite of good, but clearly it can also mean simply calamity or disaster.

This is very similar to the difference between testing and temptation. As we saw in James 1, we are to *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.* God is the one who is testing our faith. However, a few verses later we read, *Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.* We conclude that God does test us but he will never tempt us. But here’s the thing. In the original language, testing and tempting are the exact same word. What makes the difference in interpretation between testing and temptation is the context. The majority of the times this word is translated as temptation but sometimes the context demands it to be testing. In the same way, the Hebrew word in Ruth most often means evil or wickedness but sometimes the context demands it to mean calamity or disaster but not evil. This is why God can cause calamity and disaster without doing evil in the slightest bit. This is powerful providence at work in the life of Ruth.<sup>3</sup>

Since providence does not absolve us of responsibility, let me leave you with a few applications from Naomi's experience.

### **1. Trust because the Lord hears your lament.**

Naomi was in deep lament and seeing her old friends back in Bethlehem brought a flood of painful memories back to her. This reminds me of what happened to me when my dad died about fifteen years ago. He died in the post-op room at hospital and I said my goodbyes over the phone as he lay there dying. Of course I was sad and cried about it as we traveled home to Ohio for the funeral but it really hit me when I walked into his house. Just seeing and feeling the empty house caused an outpouring of overwhelming emotions. I fell to my knees and just started to weep uncontrollably. To this day it remains as the most painful emotions I have ever felt. I wonder if that was what it was like for Naomi. Seeing her own town and her old friends brought a waterfall of painful emotions flooding back into her heart and mind.

Lament and grief are a regular part of life but these never fall on deaf ears. Psalm 56:8 says, *You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?* Isn't that a wonderful word picture? God stores each of our tears in a bottle. He counts them as they fall from our face. He stores them up and he knows the true depth of our pain.

### **2. Trust because God has the power to change your circumstances.**

For example, in Acts chapter twelve, Herod arrested both Peter and James. To the surprise of everyone, Peter came home but James was beheaded. Naomi made it back to Bethlehem but her husband did not. Some prayers for healing and release from calamity will be answered the way we want them to and some will not, but pray any way and trust God for his perfect plan.

### **3. Trust because all things work for good, according to his sovereign plan.**

One of the wonderful results of the famine is that it led to Ruth being converted. No famine, no Moab. No Moab, no Ruth. No Ruth, no conversion. There is no question that God intended this story to include taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Next time we will look more closely at Ruth's miraculous conversion. Deep down I think we know that God always has a larger plan—or I should say plans, multiple plans, infinite plans—in mind for our suffering, but it is good to be reminded about it.

### **4. Trust because hope is always around the corner.**

The final verse of the first chapter is just dripping with hope. Let's read it again. *22 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.* It's the barley harvest. Aren't you excited?! Can't you just feel the hope?

The barley harvest represents the end of the famine and the beginning of much greater things. In chapter two, Ruth gleanes in the barley fields of a man named Boaz. The author of the story knows what's coming and we know what's coming but Naomi and Ruth had no idea. That's how life works, isn't it? The most mundane things can represent the most hopeful and amazing future. You never know how a phone call or a chance meeting will change your life forever.

This was my experience as a camp counselor. I landed at camp only because my former girlfriend was going to work there and it sounded like a good summer job. There was nothing spiritual at all about my decision! But out of this ‘chance’, relatively mundane decision, I met my wife and we got married and I cut my ministry teeth during those four summers at camp. My decision to enter vocational ministry was greatly influenced by my camp experiences.

So you can never know when you might have your own “barley harvest.” It might be something you’ve done a hundred times before or something mundane you’ve never done, but God will use it to drip hope into your situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Job said something very similar: *As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter* (Job 27:2).

<sup>2</sup> Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Here are several more Scriptures that testify to God’s providence.

- See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand. (Deuteronomy 32:39)
- The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD. (Proverbs 16:33)
- The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will. (Proverbs 21:1)
- Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand. (Proverbs 19:21)