

Famine and Loss: Ruth 1's Tragedy in Moab

Scriptures for Today: Ruth 1:1-5

""Ruth 1:1–5

Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehemjudah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. 2 And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehemjudah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there. 3 And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons. 4 And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years. 5 And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.""

Introduction to Ruth 1: Tragedy in Moab

The book of Ruth opens with the words: *"In the days when the judges ruled."* That sets the stage. Let's remember where we are in the Bible.

- **Genesis** showed us the beginning — creation, the fall, the flood, the covenant with Abraham, and God's promise of a chosen people.
- **Exodus** brought Israel out of Egypt by God's mighty hand, gave them His law at Sinai, and built the Tabernacle so God could dwell among them.
- **Leviticus** gave the priestly law — sacrifices, holiness, and how sinful man could approach a holy God.
- **Numbers** numbered Israel and set them in order for war, but unbelief turned their journey into forty years of wandering.
- **Deuteronomy** was Moses' final charge before Israel entered the Promised Land — a call to obey and to possess what God had given.
- **Joshua** recorded conquest and settlement — the land divided to the tribes under Joshua's leadership.
- **Judges** told the tragic cycle after Joshua's death: Israel sinned, God sent oppressors, Israel cried out, and God raised deliverers. Yet the cycle always ended the same: "every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

And right there — in the middle of those dark days of the Judges — comes the book of **Ruth**.

But the story doesn't start with a victory – not even close. It starts with famine. Elimelech, Ruth's father-in-law, leaves Bethlehem — the “house of bread” — for Moab, the land of Israel's enemies. There, Naomi buries her husband and her two sons. All that's left are three widows in a pagan land.

Ruth 1:1–5 confronts us with famine, funerals, and loss. Yet it is out of this dark soil that God begins to grow one of the brightest flowers of redemption. For from this sorrow will come Ruth, the Moabitess, whose faith and loyalty will set the stage for the line of David — and ultimately, the coming of Christ.

Outline of Judges 21, Ruth 1, Ruth 2

Judges Chapter 21:

- 1-7. The people bewail the desolation of Benjamin.
- 8-15. By the destruction of Jabesh-gilead they provide them four hundred wives.
- 16-25. They advise the remainder to surprise the virgins that danced at Shiloh.

Ruth Chapter 1:

- 1-3. Elimelech, driven by famine into Moab, dies there.
- 4-5. Mahlon and Chilion, having married wives of Moab, die also.
- 6-7. Naomi, returning homeward,
- 8-13. dissuades her two daughters-in-law from going with her.
- 14-18. Orpah leaves her, but Ruth with great constancy accompanies her.
- 19-22. They two come to Beth-lehem, where they are gladly received.

Ruth Chapter 2:

- 1-3. Ruth gleanes in the field of Boaz.
- 4-7. Boaz takes notice of her,
- 8-17. and shews her great favour.
- 18-23. That which she got, she carries to Naomi.

Focus on Ruth 1:1–5

Ruth 1:1–5 lays the foundation for the entire book. It shows us the setting (the days of the Judges), the crisis (famine and death), and the key characters (Naomi and Ruth). Without this tragedy, there would be no redemption story. If Ruth 1:1–5 never happened, David would never be born, and the line of Christ would look very different.

This passage reminds us: God works through suffering. Loss is not the end, but the beginning of His providential plan. The cross itself was the darkest tragedy — yet through it came salvation for the world.

Exposition of Ruth 1:1-5

Verse 1 — “In the days when the judges ruled ... there was a famine”

""Ruth 1:1

Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehemjudah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.""

The story of Ruth is set in the chaotic days of the Judges, when “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). In those dark times, famine strikes **Bethlehem** — the “house of bread.”

The place that should have been full was empty. This is covenant judgment: God had warned that disobedience would bring famine (Leviticus 26:18–20; Deut 28:23–24). The people’s rebellion had dried up the blessing. Rebel against God, and we’ll all have more trouble.

""Leviticus 26:14

But if ye will not hearken unto me, and will not do all these commandments;""

""Leviticus 26:20

And your strength shall be spent in vain: for your land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruits.""

One family chooses to leave Bethlehem for **Moab**. That was not a neutral move. Moab was the nation born of Lot’s incest (Genesis 19:37), a people who hired Balaam to curse Israel (Numbers 22:3–6), and whom God had barred from His assembly “unto the tenth generation” (Deut 23:3). This was the Moabites – they were not a friend of God at all.

To leave Bethlehem for Moab is to seek life outside of God’s will. It shows unbelief. Instead of repenting under God’s chastening hand, they ran – you could say. Like Cain in Genesis 4:16, they went “out from the presence of the LORD.”

But there was a famine in the land of Israel at that time. Bad things happened next. Just like with Lot – bad things happened when he pitched his tent toward Sodom.

We have to be careful of that. We don’t see many sodomites around here, which is great, but we do have murders, drugs, alcohol, laziness, extortioners, covetous, busybodies, vain talkers, deceivers, and leeches. We must be careful not to allow this to affect our children.

We see this man of Bethlehemjudah, with his wife and two sons, going into Moab. Let’s see what happens next.

Verse 2 — “A certain man ... of Bethlehemjudah”

""Ruth 1:2

And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehemjudah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.""

Now the family is named. **Elimelech** means “My God is King,” yet his life denies his name. Instead of bowing under God’s reign, he runs from famine. **Naomi** means “Pleasant,” though her life will soon taste bitterness. **Mahlon** means “Sickly” and **Chilion** means “Pining” or “Wasting Away” — names that ominously foreshadow death.

So, again, we have Elimelech and Naomi – married, from the area of Bethlehemjudah. They were Ephrathites. They come into the country of Moab with their two sons: Mahlon and Chilion.

What does “Ephrathite” mean?

Ephrath (or Ephrathah) was the older name for Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19; Micah 5:2).

An **Ephrathite** is someone from that region, tied to the **ancestral line of Judah and David**.

So this isn’t just random geography — it’s **messianic geography**. Ruth’s story is already tied to the promise of Christ before she ever shows up. We don’t see Ruth yet at verse 2. But we see this family is from the tribe of Judah. Bethlehem was in the tribal allotment of Judah shown in Joshua 15.

""Micah 5:2

But thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.""

The text is careful to connect Elimelech’s family to **Bethlehem-Ephratah**, the very place from which Messiah was prophesied to come.

This shows God’s providence: even in famine, failure, and death, He is steering events toward the birth of Christ.

As Ephrathites, they weren’t nobodies. They had **covenant heritage**. They carried the weight of Judah’s promise (Genesis 49:10).

To leave Bethlehem for Moab wasn’t just moving — it was walking away from their God-given inheritance.

The famine strikes Bethlehem — the “house of bread.” The Ephrathites leave the place of promise, but God will bring them back.

Out of this “wrong turn,” God weaves the story of Ruth, Boaz, Obed, David, and finally Christ.

So, please hear this. Maybe you don't think that Elimelech did wrong by going to Moab. But listen to this Scripture and this might make you think again:

""Deuteronomy 23:3-6

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever: 4 Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee. 5 Nevertheless the LORD thy God would not hearken unto Balaam; but the LORD thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because the LORD thy God loved thee. 6 Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days for ever.""

That's pretty clear, right? Again, "Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days for ever." Elimelech made a bad decision and it cost him and his sons. We don't know how they died, but they did. Look, God puts you in these places in your life for a reason. Follow His plan for you.

Also notice in Ruth 1:1 that they went “to sojourn” — just for a while. But verse 2 says, “and continued there.” That's how compromise works. Lot pitched his tent toward Sodom (Genesis 13:12), but soon he lived inside of Sodom. Sin always keeps you longer than you planned. Remember that.

Pay attention to what's happening in your life. Don't allow this world to affect you and increase the sin in your life. God often uses famine as chastening. Don't run away from the chastening of the Lord. Don't flee to a pagan land. Watch what happens next:

Verse 3 — “Elimelech ... died”

""Ruth 1:3

And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.""

The one who left to preserve life finds death instead. This is the irony of unbelief.

Jesus said, “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it” (Matthew 16:25). Elimelech fled famine, but Moab became his grave. Trust the Lord in all things – even in famine and hard times. Trust the Lord the most in those times. Don't flee unless God leads you to do that.

Naomi is now a widow in a foreign land – and not one where she should be. In God's covenant, widows were to be specially protected (Exodus 22:22–24; Deut 10:18), yet Naomi is outside the covenant people, cut off from their help. Her husband's choice leaves her exposed. This is what happens when we try to find safety outside of God's place of blessing.

For example, I believe I made a very bad decision moving to the pagan Northwest away from my parents and family. But thank God He got me back home. He corrected my mistake – thank God I didn't end up dead there.

So we now see Elimelech dead and Naomi is left with her two sons.

Verse 4 — “They took them wives of the women of Moab”

""Ruth 1:4

And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years.""

Elimelech's sons take Moabite wives: Orpah and Ruth. This is direct disobedience to God's command: "Neither shalt thou make marriages with them" (Deut 7:3-4). Moabites in particular were excluded from the congregation (Deut 23:3). Yet God, in His providence, overrules their failure.

One of those Moabite women, Ruth, will become the great-grandmother of King David, and appear in the genealogy of Christ (Matthew 1:5). Even though she was a Moabite, she changed her mind and believed in the one true God. She chose to believe in Naomi's God. You'll see that later here in Ruth Chapter 1.

This is grace — not an excuse for disobedience, but a testimony that God's mercy is greater than our sin. Romans 5:20: "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."

Elimelech broke God's commandment. Mahlon and Chilion break God's commandments. Ruth was a great woman. God turned this into good. Ruth becomes a part of the tribe of Judah. She was a Moabite that turned to God. And God placed her in the direct physical and spiritual line of Jesus Christ. Why? Because she believed.

Verse 5 — “Mahlon and Chilion died also”

""Ruth 1:5

And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.""

Ten years pass. Both sons die, and Naomi is left with no husband, no sons, and only two Moabite daughters-in-law. In that culture, this was the very picture of hopelessness. No protector, no provider, no future. The "house of bread" has become a house of graves.

Yet this is how God sets the stage for redemption. Naomi is emptied so that God can fill her. Out of her barrenness, God will bring blessing. This is the pattern of the Gospel: death before life, sorrow before joy, the cross before the crown. Naomi's story anticipates the greater Redeemer who would come from her line — Christ, who brings life out of death.

Summary of Ruth 1:1–5:

Famine (v.1): In the days of the Judges, God sends famine to Bethlehem, the “house of bread,” reminding Israel that disobedience leads to emptiness. **Flight** (vv.1–2): Elimelech’s family leaves Bethlehem for Moab, seeking life outside God’s land — but names like Mahlon (“sickly”) and Chilion (“pining”) hint at coming sorrow. **Funerals** (vv.3–5): First Elimelech, then both sons die, leaving Naomi widowed and childless in a foreign land. Loss replaces plenty, graves replace bread, but God is preparing a story of redemption. The opening of Ruth shows us that when life empties out, God is already setting the stage for His grace to overflow.

Doctrinal Truths in Ruth 1:1–5 — Famine and Loss

1. **Doctrine of Sin and Judgment (Leviticus 26:18–20; Romans 6:23).** Famine in the land pictures sin’s wages — sin brings emptiness, sorrow, and death.
2. **Doctrine of Providence (Romans 8:28; Genesis 50:20).** Even in tragedy, God works all things for good. Naomi’s loss becomes the pathway for Ruth’s redemption.
3. **Doctrine of Separation & Holiness (Deuteronomy 7:3–4; 2 Corinthians 6:17).** The marriages to Moabite women show the danger of compromise. Yet even here, God’s grace shines through.
4. **Doctrine of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:5).** Ruth the Moabitess becomes part of Christ’s genealogy, showing God’s mercy to the nations.
5. **Doctrine of Hope (Lamentations 3:22–23).** Loss does not have the last word. God’s mercies are new every morning.

Practical Applications in Ruth 1:1–5 — Lessons from Loss

1. **Stay in God’s Place.** Elimelech left Bethlehem for Moab, but safety is never outside of God’s will. Don’t run from trials — trust God where He has placed you.
2. **Expect God’s Hand in Sorrow.** Naomi buried her husband and sons, yet God was at work bringing Ruth to Bethlehem and setting the stage for redemption.
3. **Trust God’s Providence Over Your Past.** Even sinful choices (like Moabite marriages) cannot overturn God’s plan. His grace is greater than our failures.
4. **Remember that Names Mean Something.** “Elimelech” means “My God is King.” His life denied his name when he ran to Moab. Live consistent with your testimony. He was most likely a saved man but not following the commandments of God.

5. **Look for the Gospel in Loss.** The cross was the greatest tragedy, yet the greatest victory. Your pain may be the soil for God's glory.

Warnings and Encouragements

Warnings from Ruth 1:1–5

- Beware leaving God's house for the world's solutions — Moab is never better than Bethlehem.
- Beware compromise in relationships — wrong unions bring sorrow.
- Beware trusting in self-preservation — running from famine led to graves.

Encouragements from Ruth 1:1–5

- God is King even when names and lives contradict it.
- God works even in Moab — His grace reaches outsiders.
- God's plan of redemption begins in loss, but ends in glory.

The Gospel Connection in Ruth 1:1–5

Ruth 1 begins in famine and death, but it points to Jesus Christ. Bethlehem, the "house of bread," would one day see the true Bread of Life born (John 6:35). Ruth, a Gentile (not an Israelite physically), is grafted into Israel (physically and spiritually) — a picture of the Gospel bringing salvation to the nations. Naomi's loss points forward to Mary's sorrow, but out of that sorrow comes the Redeemer of all nations. This tragedy sets the stage for triumph — at the cross, the darkest day became the brightest hope. Remember that in your life. The darkest of days will soon become glorious.

Conclusion: Ruth 1:1–5 — Famine and Loss

The opening of Ruth reminds us: God writes redemption out of ruin. Elimelech ran, Naomi wept, Ruth clung to Naomi — and through it all, God worked. He works all things together for good to those who love Him and keep His commandments.

One-Sentence Takeaway: Even in famine and loss, God's providence is at work, turning tragedy into the seedbed of redemption.

Let's pray.