

The Book of Ruth

A Tale Of Two Widows

by Steve Zeisler

The facts and the truth are not the same thing, are they? Discovering the truth is a matter of interpreting the facts, making sense of the data, putting it into categories and assigning meaning to it.

Ruth 1:1-5 tells us the terrible facts of a tragic history. This book opens with grief, loss, hardship, and suffering. Here are the facts:

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. And 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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. And they took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

The opening sentence tells us of difficulties on the macro level. It says that it was during the period of the judges when this story took place. That was a time of moral chaos and national humiliation for Israel. It was a terrible time to be a Jew. Further, we're told that the weather didn't cooperate and that famine struck. And it was a lasting famine; ten years would go by while the famine blighted at least the region of Bethlehem.

Then we enter the personal story of this family, a man named Elimelech, which means "My God is King," and a woman named Naomi, which means "Pleasant." With such names, they were, we can assume, good people. Buffeted by circumstances, they moved to Moab so that they could survive the famine. Then in the land of Moab both the husband and the two sons who married there died, tragically, for reasons we don't know.

Standing in the front of the auditorium during worship services, I sometimes find my gaze captured by widows and widowers in this congregation, people who are now alone because their lifetime partner was taken away. It's heart-wrenching to remember the story of saying good-bye to the beloved partner. In many cases I was part of that process.

But Naomi's tragedy was compounded because she had two sons who also died, not as older men who had lived full lives and accomplished much, but as young men, recently married. Neither of them had been able to produce children, so we can imagine they were in their prime when their lives were taken.

Leslie and I have three children, and in the last five years or so, two of them went through very difficult times medically. I feared for their future, and it was as heart-wrenching as anything I've ever gone through. I'm grateful that God has brought them both through the threats. But this woman's children both died.

The emotional pain and loss of seeing her family die, in her arms we can well imagine, was made even worse, though. To be a woman alone was to be faced with ruin in that culture. There was no social security, no safety net, no way for a woman to predict good things for her future if she didn't have a man in her life. Naomi's future was filled with threat and fear and difficulty.

DECIDING WHAT IS TRUE

Those are the facts. But what do they mean? What is the truth? The rest of chapter 1 is going to give us two voices, Naomi's and Ruth's, speaking about what the facts mean. These two voices are very different from each other. One of the helpful literary devices of this book is that what Naomi's daughter-in-law went through paralleled what Naomi herself went through. Ruth was also a widow, childless, and poor; Ruth would also live a life in a land that was not her own, being dislocated and an immigrant. Yet Ruth's response to it was completely different. She saw the facts differently. Seeing the two of them side by side will help us understand much of what God has to say to us in this passage.

When you're asked to describe yourself, which facts come out? Well, you're probably not as bad off as Naomi (a very small handful of us are). But you're also not like Tiger Woods, are you? You're not young and rich and handsome and smart, leading the Masters by nine strokes with the best golf swing in history. You're somewhere in between. But given the facts, whatever they are, the question that remains is, what is the truth about you? Where is God in this?

There are many ways we can take hold of the conditions of our life and try to give them meaning. Remember what Job's comforters did to try to give meaning to his life when Job suffered blow after blow, like Naomi. They came to him and said, "You're suffering because you're guilty." A lot of people think that way, don't they? When life gets hard they say, "I must have done something terrible to deserve this." And they pile shame upon the suffering they're already experiencing.

Other people try to give meaning to the facts by mounting political crusades to change conditions that are hard. They say, "The status of women in this culture needs to be overturned. We're going to do something about that." Or, "Men are dying too young in this culture. We need to do something about the medical procedures for sickly men."

Some adopt the old advice of Paul Simon: "If I never loved, I never would have cried. I am a rock, I am an island." This approach disengages them from life. They won't suffer anything because they won't get near enough to anyone to ever allow suffering.

But God has to figure into the conclusion someplace. We have to draw meaning ultimately from his purposes and his reality. Life has to make sense in his presence. And that's what this book is about. So we'll turn now and hear Naomi and Ruth each speak about the facts. (You may notice as you read through this book that more than half of the verses in the book are direct address. This is a book of conversation, and we'll do well to learn to hear what the people are saying.) Verses 6-22:

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food. So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And 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. May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Then she said, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back 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. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you

and me." When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came about when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" And she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara [which means bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Let's look at what Naomi regarded as the truth of the matter, how she gave structure to the data of her life. We'll see it as she prayed, gave advice, and drew conclusions about herself.

DECIDING GOD HAS FORSAKEN YOU

It's helpful and important to realize that the first thing Naomi did was pray. Twice she called on God to do good to these two young women. I believe-and here we have to enter into the story and use our imagination a bit-Naomi prayed habitually. She was absolutely certain that the biggest presence in the universe was the presence of God. Nothing happened outside his will, so he was responsible for everything that happened. He was powerful enough to do whatever he chose. Only a fool would not pray, given that. God deserved to be prayed to, and Naomi took him seriously. Verse 6 is an interesting statement. At the end of the famine, it says that she heard that God had visited his people. It doesn't say that she heard that the rains came back, or the meteorological conditions were now favorable. God came. The reason there was no more famine was that he did something about it. And God was kind sometimes. She prayed, "May the LORD deal kindly with you...." It was worth asking for.

A woman whose first comment in the current situation was about her prayer life must have prayed and prayed during those ten years. She must have prayed that the famine would be over quickly, and that they could go back to their home. And when her husband got sick she must have prayed. When her first son got sick she must have prayed. Burying her husband, burying the first son, burying the second son, she must have prayed, asking for relief from the God who was in charge of everything, because she was a woman of prayer. Over and over again the things she asked for were withheld, and yet she didn't stop praying.

But it's significant that she said to these two young women, "May the LORD deal kindly with you," not, "May the LORD deal kindly with us." She had stopped praying for herself. She had concluded that God hated her. It was his prerogative to hate whom he wanted to hate. So she had stopped asking for her own future. God's power was certain, but his love was not.

Secondly, Naomi gave advice, and her advice is an interesting statement of her perspective on what was true. She was almost sarcastic at points in her realism. Only a fool would not pray, but once you're done praying you have to live as if you can count on nobody but yourself. You've got to face the facts as they are, calculate the possibilities, maximize the opportunities for yourself. That's the only way reasonable people survive in this world.

Her daughters-in-law made an important statement in verse 10: "We should surely return with you to your people." Her people were the covenant people of God, the ones who were given the promises and the Law, the ones God had chosen especially to work through in all of history. They wanted to go and join the community of those who knew the Lord.

But Naomi said, "Don't be a fool. Who's going to marry a woman of Moab in Israel in the time of the judges, when everybody is selfish and lawless? You have no hope of getting a husband if you come back to Israel with me. Return to your own homes. At least you have a chance there." Then she says, "Yes, maybe if I had sons, but I'm too old to have more children. Even if I were to get married and have sons today"-and she makes the whole thing silly. What she was basically saying was, "We've petitioned God, now forget that. If I were rich, I'd help you. If I had sons, I'd help you. But I don't have anything I can do for you.

Therefore, you have to help yourself." The human players have to create the world they live in, Naomi believed.

In verse 15, when Naomi couldn't persuade Ruth to leave, she said, "Orpah has gone back to her gods." That is one of the heart-breaking statements in this book. Naomi sent that young woman back to the worship of Chemosh in Moab. Chemosh was a demon. The Moabites worshiped an image of him that had an open mouth and a fire inside, by placing living children into the open mouth. Naomi urged Ruth to go back to that, too. It's heart-wrenching to realize how little hope Naomi had. After years and years of praying to God and seeing people die, she was even willing to send Orpah and Naomi back there, because all they could do was play the hand they were dealt.

Finally, we have two statements of Naomi's convictions about herself. In verse 13 she said, "...It is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." She had been at this a lot longer, and she knew for sure that God had it in for her. Things would be different if that weren't true.

Then in verse 20, she came back to the town of Bethlehem, and when the people come out to see her, she changed her name. "There's nothing pleasant about me. Call me wretched, bitter, angry. God has dealt bitterly with me. I went out full, and I've come back empty." Given the facts, this was what she created as her truth.

Ray Stedman used to tell the story of an old woman and a preacher. She would come up and list all her problems in life at the end of every service, and he would try to give her some positive reason to look at life differently. Her response to the preacher was, "You know, young man, when God sends tribulations he expects you to tribulate." But Naomi had gone beyond that. She wasn't just tribulating amidst her tribulations. She had decided that God didn't love her. He loved some people, but not her.

Now let me ask you a question of fact before we move on. Did Naomi come back empty? Was she alone when she came back to Bethlehem? No, there was a young woman with her. But as far as Naomi was concerned she came back with no one. As far as God was concerned, she came back with the whole future of the human race holding onto her arm. She came back with a young woman who would be the mother of Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David the king of Israel, the father of the Messiah of Israel and the Lord of the nations, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. That's who she came back with. Not empty, but fuller than she had ever been. Yet in her bitterness she couldn't see it. The facts became distorted for her: "I'm empty, nothing, nobody, God-forsaken."

THE DIFFERENCE GRATITUDE MAKES

What was Ruth's declaration of the truth? It's interesting what she didn't say. She didn't say, "I'm going to go back with you to Bethlehem because God will surely provide a husband for me there." She had listened to Naomi give her all the reasons why that wasn't going to happen, and she basically agreed with her. There is no evidence that she believed she would ever have a husband again. One of the interesting interpretive questions from the first paragraph is how soon in the ten-year period she and her husband were married. If it was early on, and she had lived for some years with a husband and had not had a child, there may have been some question in her mind as to whether she would ever be able to have children. And she was certainly no catch for other reasons: She wasn't a Jew, she had no money or property. She had nothing to offer-why would anyone marry her?

But what Ruth did say was, "God has given us each other." What she believed that Naomi couldn't believe was that they loved each other and that was worth something. Orpah cried when Naomi sent her away. When Naomi came back to the town of Bethlehem, all the people came rushing out to see her. There was something marvelously attractive about Naomi. She was charismatic and energetic, and she probably overshadowed her husband when he was alive. She was one of those people who fought life, fought with God, wanted the best, had a deep heart and a deep love for people, and they loved her back. It's just that she had quit hoping in the Lord by this time. But Ruth said, "You know, I may never have anyone but you. But you're enough for me. The relationship that God has given us as mother and daughter, as sisters, as friends, is enough for me. God has not been bad to us, he's been good to us in ways that we didn't expect. So don't send me away and forbid me to make my future with you. Where you go I will go. Where you

lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. Where you die I will die and be buried."

The way we must read Ruth's speech in this setting is that at the heart of it was gratitude. Naomi had chosen to focus on what she didn't have, and had grown angry and bitter and had assumed God didn't love her. Ruth had chosen to focus on what she did have and was thankful, because everything had changed. She had grown up as a worshiper of a demon and she now knew the God of Israel. She had grown up among a people who had no future, and she now had the possibility of joining the people of God, the heirs of the promise, the ones to whom the Law had been given, the ones from whom Messiah would come. She had the opportunity to have what she had never had: status in Israel, intimacy with God, a true friend. She didn't have a husband, but that was okay. She was grateful for what she had. She analyzed life 180 degrees opposite of the way Naomi analyzed life.

I've come to think that it's unfortunate that this statement of Ruth's gets used in wedding services. It's unfortunate because it's strategic that this was not a commitment between lovers. It was a commitment between friends, sisters, mother and daughter. And as long as the church can't tell the world that it is possible to have relationships of depth, seriousness, lasting commitment, future, and real love without their being sexual, then we are going to live in a world that continues to be crazy in regard to relationships.

Most people live life at an extraordinary pace. Things change at a rate that nobody can keep up with. There is a ruthlessness and a competitiveness about people's lives. Relationships are bound to change tomorrow. For the vast majority, especially in urban settings like ours, no one stays the same, no one knows their neighbors, and they're competing with everyone they work with. There is no possibility of commitment. Because there's so much energy and power in sexuality, people use sex as a short-cut to relationship. Serial lovers are the choice for some, a one- or two-year relationship followed by another, and another. Adultery is openly advocated by some. Some sanction gay marriages or domestic partners. The only possibility for being connected to anyone, for the vast majority of single people in contemporary society, revolves around some kind of romantic attraction. And if the church doesn't say something different, then the world is never going to figure it out.

Here in the book of Ruth is a relationship of extraordinary commitment, one that has a future, substance, love. I would like to read the diary of a contemporary single man or woman who has concluded, the way both of these women concluded, that they do not expect to marry. Perhaps they have same-gender attractions. Perhaps they have elderly parents who require all their time and attention. Perhaps they have emotional quirks in their personality that make it hard for them to be committed. Whatever the reason, they don't ever expect to marry, but they can write in their diary, "By the grace of God, I have a family, and I intend to participate at a deep level in the lives of my brothers and sisters. I need not live alone." Just the fact that this story creates for us the possibility of serious, committed, loving relationships gives us a chance to offer the world what it needs. There are ways to be part of a family and have relationship that is committed and honest and true, without breaking apart what is unique in all relationships, ruining what is possible in marriage, in order to deal with the severe loneliness so many people have. Sexual attraction is not the only way to have a relationship.

Naomi was frustrated, angry, and bitter because she had decided that God didn't love her. Ruth, given essentially the same hand in life except that she was younger, concluded that God did love her. And what made Ruth able to see that is that she saw what she had as a gift from God, and she was grateful for it. They were completely different in their orientation toward the future, weren't they? Ruth said, "I have no idea what will happen, but I can be committed to you and your God and your people, and let him deal with the future." Naomi said, "The future will come only as you calculate it and make it happen." She was frightened, angry, and withdrawn. We'll see in the rest of the story that God had to pound on her to make her believe that anything could happen that she didn't do for herself.

We also have the option, given whatever set of facts we have, of determining what the truth is. If you're a Christian, you're a child of God, an intimate of Christ, the residence of the Holy Spirit. You have the option of being thankful, leaning into the future, holding on to what is good; or concluding that hard facts mean lovelessness and a life without God, his hand turned against you, his rejection, and so on. But the issue is not what your life is made of, the issue is what you have determined to be true.

One of the great things about this book is that God doesn't leave Naomi here. When people are frustrated and angry, and they pray with their fists clenched at God, yell at people, and struggle with life; they don't get left behind. Naomi is going to be changed. But you can start out right at the beginning-why go through all the hardship? Why not live like God loves you now?

Catalog. No. 4581
Ruth 1:1-22
Second Message
Steve Zeisler
April 13, 1997

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1995 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.

The Scripture quotations in this message are all taken from New American Standard Bible, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.