

Trusting God in Suffering

Ruth 1:1-18

Trusting God (Ruth)

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Sunday, October 6, 2013, 10:30am at Living Hope Church of Roselle, Illinois

“Affliction doth not rise out of the dust or come to men by chance; but it is the Lord that sends it, and we should own and reverence His hand in it.” THOMAS BOSTON

1. WELCOME VISITORS
2. THANKS TO ALL WHO HELPED AND PARTICIPATED WITH THE LADIES’ RETREAT.
3. SIGN UP FOR MEN’S PRAYER BREAKFAST
4. NEW MEMBERS’ CLASS THIS SAT AT 9:30 TILL NOON

Open your Bible to **Ruth 1:1-18**. We are continuing in a series through the Sermon on the Mount entitled: “Trusting God.” This morning we are looking a message entitled: “Trusting God in Suffering.”



Pain is a constant in this life. You have either just finished a trial, are going through one right now, or are getting ready to go through one. These trials test our faith.

Jill’s Engagement Ring

I remember when I got Jill’s engagement ring. I got such a great deal on it I had to get it appraised. It was worth more than ten times what I paid for it.

Trials and suffering and pain, help us to appraise our faith, but it also grows and strengthens our faith. So we come to a new study about “Trusting God” in the book of Ruth.

God’s Grace in Ruth

Ruth is the record of a Jewish family living in the terrible times of the Judges of Israel. During those years, “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). In such a sin-filled setting, Ruth is a bright illustration of the grace of God and His abounding mercy. Grace is God’s provision for man’s need. It is His eternal and absolutely free favor,

shown in salvation which He offers to all. The entire book of Ruth reveals the character and ways of God: His providence, sovereignty, grace, holiness, and His invitation of salvation to all people.

We do not deserve *anything* from God. He does not have to save us. Nor must He listen to us when we pray. He does not need to guide our lives, nor provide for our daily needs. But He does all this for us—and much, much more—because He is *gracious*. One purpose of the book of Ruth is to show that even in the Old Testament the grace of God included the Gentiles.

Outline

How do we deal with suffering?

- The **wrong** way to deal with suffering – running **from** God (1-5)
- The **godly** way to deal with suffering – running **to** God (6-18)

I. The wrong way to deal with **suffering** – running from God (1:1-5).

The Context of the Suffering

Judges 1:1-2, “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”

THE FAMILY

Significant Names

The names of people in the Bible tell a story.

- Naomi means “Pleasantness” or we might say “Sweetheart”
 - Later on she’s going to say call me Mara or “bitter pain” or Painful.
- Elimelech means “God is my King”
- Mahlon means “Sick”
- Chilion means “Dying”

Significant Places

The places also tell as story, vs. 2, “They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah”. Ruth doesn’t know it, but she is marrying into royalty. Mahlon is an Ephrathite from Bethlehem. This would be like meeting someone from the UK and finding out you married someone from the “house of Tudor” from London, England. So Elimelech is royalty, but he doesn’t know it. He doesn’t know what God has in store for his family.

Ruth’s Family & Childhood (Judges 3:12-30)

Ruth was born in the land of Moab. Moab was near the land of Israel. The Moabites and Israelites were enemies. Years before, God cursed the Moabites because they had been unfriendly to the people of Israel (when they were on their way from Egypt to Canaan—Deuteronomy 23:3-4).

Ruth in Moab

In Moab, Ruth's parents taught her about their gods—particularly the one called Chemosh. (See Numbers 21:29.) She would have known that many human sacrifices had been offered to it. (See 2 Kings 3:26-27.) You can imagine how this must have filled her with terror as a child.

Eglon, Possibly Ruth's Father

Rabbis in the Talmudic tradition claimed that Ruth was likely the daughter of Eglon, king of the Moabites. Remember, he was the very fat king (see Judges 3:17) of Moab.

God allowed King Eglon to conquer the Israelites because they had turned from worshiping Him. Quickly the rebellious people of Israel learned the awfulness of being ruled by a cruel king (Judges 3:12-30).

For 18 years the Moabites had ruled over the people of Israel. But when the Israelites truly repented of their rebellion and turned to God again, He forgave them. Then He helped a young Israelite man named Ehud to kill King Eglon of Moab. At last the people of Israel were free from the power of the Moabites.

About that time, there was a famine in the land of Israel, and this is where the story of Ruth takes place.

THE FAMINE

God's Judgment

The Scriptures here do not expressly state it, but it leads us to wonder if the famine was not in fact God's judgment upon his people, because famine, if not every time, almost every time that it is mentioned in Scripture, is done so in conjunction with God's judgment against his people, because if they refuse to obey him, then he will refuse to feed them.

It is important to note in our day of plenty that food, that our daily food does not come from the grocer, but ultimately it comes from the Lord as a gift of grace.

House of Bread

Bethlehem, literally means, "House of Bread." But now God has stripped the House of Bread of its bread with this famine. How strange that there should be a famine in Bethlehem, this "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 worshiped the idols of the heathen nations around them; and God had to discipline them (Jdg. 2:10-19). The godly had to suffer because of the ungodly, even in Bethlehem.¹

50 Miles to Moab

God's judgment seems to be on Israel, because 50 miles away the Moabites seem to be just fine. And the famine seems to only be surrounding God's people in Bethlehem.

One Man's Decision

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Be Committed* (pp. 13-14). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

And now we are intensely focused on this one family. There is a husband, his wife, their two boys: Mahlon and Chilion. The husband, Elimelech, is left with a decision to make, and that is, “Do I remain with my family in Bethlehem, where there is famine and people are literally starving to death? Or do I journey and relocate, move, to Moab.” Moab is some 50 miles away, and he decides he will go. So we read in verse 2: “They went into the country of Moab and remained there.”

Let’s Not Criticize Elimelech: Unwise, but not Ungodly

We ought not to criticize Elimelech. You’ve likely never been where he was. His sons were sick and dying, so he named them that. There is nothing that touches closer to home. What we are saying is not that Elimelech was **ungodly**, but he was **unwise**.

And so what he determines to do is **not** deal with the underlying spiritual causes of sin and rebellion and such. He instead – as many men do – simply looks at the economics and the job opportunity and the upward mobility that is afforded him in Moab, and he relocates his family to Moab, which at first glance does not seem like such a tragic, strategic error – because ultimately it is, because Moab is no place that God’s people are to dwell. The Bible tells us they didn’t worship Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They worshipped a false God named Chemosh. And so God’s people weren’t to move to Moab. God’s people were not to dwell with Moabites.

Mortgaging the Future

So Elimelech serves as the tragic example of the man who did not count the spiritual costs of a relocation of his family. He didn’t realize, or perhaps failed to rightly consider, that when a man makes decisions for his home and his family, he is perhaps mortgaging their future, thinking very shortsightedly.

Where we live determines who our friends are, where or if we go to church, and often who our children marry.

When Trouble Comes: Endure, Escape, or Enlist

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).

Why Was This Wrong?

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

1. He sought safety through FINANCES instead of by FAITH. **Matthew 6:33**, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” The Word of God expressly forbade God’s people from settling in Moab.

2. He cared more for the PHYSICAL than 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. One of the devil's pet lies is: "You do have to live!" That was his temptation to our Lord. What was Jesus' answer? "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." And it is *in God* that "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28); and He is able to take care of us.
3. He trusted the ENEMY more than the LORD. Elimelech's name we learned means, "God is my King." But he wasn't living like God was king. 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 (Jdg. 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), a picture of a humiliated nation washing the feet of the conquering soldiers.²

THE FUNERALS

Elimelech Dies

Verse 3 brings us some tragic news: "But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died..." Why did Elimelech move to Moab? So that he wouldn't die. What did Elimelech do in Moab? He died. The truth is the safest place in the world is the center of God's will. It's hard to be content. Chicago's a hard place to live. It's very much like Israel was back in Ruth's day.

Left with Two Sons

Verse 3, "But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons." There's a bit of hope in that. In that culture, they would look after her, care for her, feed her, nurture her in her old age. She would be okay because she had two sons.

Moabite Marriage

Verses 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."

They're marrying girls who, in all likelihood, worship another God. I mean, this is devastating, but in some ways, we must fault the father on two accounts. One, he moved them to Moab, so he only left the boys one option, that being marry a Moabite woman; and secondly, he apparently approved of these marriages. You men need to think that where you live is also where your sons and daughters will find their spouses.

Mahlon (Sick) and (Chilion) Die

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Be Committed* (pp. 13–16). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Verse 5, “5 and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.”

So now “Sick” and “Dying” die. Why did Elimelech move to Moab? So that he and his wife and sons would not die. Now all but Naomi is dead, and Ruth and Orpah are childless.

Job’s Choice

There is always a choice in suffering. What did Job do when he was faced with suffering? **Job 1:20-21**, “Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 21 And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

What was his wife’s response? Job 2:9, “Curse God and die.” We can be like **Adam**, and run and hide. **Jonah** also learned that you cannot run from God!

Habakkuk’s Choice to Rejoice

Or we can be like **Habakkuk 3:17–18** when he faced another famine. What was the Prophet Habakkuk’s choice? His **choice** was to **rejoice!** “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.”

APPLICATIONS

1. Suffering Designed to Draw us to God

What’s the point? Bad things happen if suffering comes, and we run away from God. Suffering is designed to draw us to God.

CS LEWIS

CS Lewis said: “Pain is God’s megaphone.”

JC RYLE

JC Ryle said this: “Affliction is one of God’s medicines! By it He often teaches lessons which would be learned in no other way.... Health is a great blessing but sanctified disease is a greater. Prosperity and worldly comfort, are what all naturally desire, but **losses** and **crosses** are far better for us if they lead us to Christ. Let us beware of murmuring in the time of trouble.... There are no lessons so useful as those learned in the school of affliction. There is no commentary that opens up the Bible so much as sickness and sorrow. The resurrection morning will prove that many of the losses of God’s people were in reality, **eternal gains**. Thousands at the last day will testify with David, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted” (Psalm. 119:71).³

Who knows how God would have blessed Elimelech, had he remained in Bethlehem. We do know it is never good to run from God-ordained trials.

³ JC Ryle, Commentary on the Gospel of John.

II. The right way to deal with **suffering** – running to God (1:6-18).

Naomi's Commitment to Yahweh

Judges 1:6-18, “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.”

Naomi says “**Yahweh** has visited His people.” She doesn't use Elohim when referring to God. She has told Ruth and Orpah about Yahweh. She uses the covenant name of God. She's committed.

Naomi is Missing God's Blessing

Wrong decisions were made, but Naomi responds to God's providence. God visited His faithful people in Bethlehem, but not His 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, KJV). 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.

So Naomi has a conversation with her two daughters-in-law. 54% of the book is conversation. It's an unusual conversation, where we see a test of faith and a commitment of faith. We see how to respond to suffering.

Sanctified Affliction

The Puritan John Flavel writes a lot about “sanctified affliction”. There are bitter providences. God is not the author of sin, but all events pass through the hands of the Lord. He is sovereign and He is good. Do we believe this? In the following conversation we find three women. Two of them believe that God is good, and good, and that He can be trusted in affliction. One, Orpah, likely has the outward shell of a believer, but eventually turns back to her gods.

A Test of Faith

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.”

Anti-Evangelism?

As we read this conversation, it seems it is “anti-evangelism”. Orpah is going to do what we would consider ordinary. She goes home. Ruth is going to do what is extraordinary, and she will refuse to go home. And in this we see that Orpah, when it really comes to an issue of faith and trust in God, she turns her back on God and returns home. We’ll see that, verse 15. “And then Naomi says to Ruth, after Orpah has left and gone home, “See your sister-in-law” – that is Orpah – “has gone back to her people and her gods.” This is quite strange. This is anti-evangelism. But when we see it in context, this is a test of faith, and Orpah goes home because she looked like a believer, but was faking it and really a pagan girl.

Naomi and Divine Providence

Notice Naomi says something to the girls about God’s providence in verse 13, “No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me...” This is God’s doing. God has a purpose in this. He is chastening me. Trials are scary, but what would be scarier would be a God who was not in control!

Sanctification

God’s purpose in affliction is sanctification. Spurgeon said, “There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of Divine Sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe troubles, they believe that Sovereignty hath ordained their afflictions, that Sovereignty overrules them, and that Sovereignty will sanctify them all.”

Ruth and the Worship of God

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.”

What’s the issue? It’s the worship of God at stake. Ruth says, “I’m not goin’ home. There’s no Christians there. There’s no church. You’re the only Christian in town. You left.” Right?

Ruth, Possibly Greater Faith than Abraham

Ruth has this amazing faith. Consider this: she is going there with no husband, no home, no friends, no family, no job, no food. Let me go out to the end of a twig at the end of a branch and say that she may have greater faith than Abraham. If you remember the story of Abraham, he left his hometown and his family and their religion of worship of a false god to go somewhere else and start over with Yahweh. Why did he do that? Because God told him to. Ruth’s story is in many regards like Abraham’s. She left her family, her hometown, and her religion to go start a new life in a new town with Yahweh, with one notable distinction, that being God never spoke to her. God never told Ruth to go.

APPLICATION

So how are we to deal with suffering? God is good and God is sovereign. He does not bring pain, but only to bring us closer to Himself.

God Loves Those He Afflicts

Robert Murray McCheyne said, “God's children should not doubt His love when He afflicts. Christ loved Lazarus peculiarly, and yet He afflicted Him very sore. A surgeon never bends his eye so tenderly upon his patient, as when he is putting in the lancet, or probing the wound to the very bottom. And so with Christ – He bends His eye most tenderly over His own at the time He is afflicting them... A goldsmith when he casts gold into the furnace looks after it.”⁴

God is good to prune us. He is good to cut us down. John 15:1–2, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

David in the Caves and in his Comfort Zone

Remember that David wrote about half of the Psalms, most of them when he was hiding in caves from Saul or on the run from his son Absalom. When was David in the worst place? Not in the CAVE but when he was in his COMFORT ZONE. It was in his comfort zone that he fell with Bathsheba. So much good came out of him when he was in the caves.

What God has in Store

Ruth doesn't know what God has in store for her. She has suffered so much, but she knows God is good and that He is great and sovereign.

How God Uses Suffering

Jonathan Edwards was one of the godliest men we can think of. Yet he was kicked out of his church for taking a stand for regeneration (against the Halfway Covenant) and he died from a vaccination at the tender age of 55 before he would become the president of Princeton College (now University). Sarah Edwards reflected on God's bitter providence on hearing that her husband died:

‘What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him [her husband] so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be’⁵

No one could have known how God would use Jonathan Edwards in an even greater way. He didn't need him to be president of Princeton. He wanted to use his writings.

Spurgeon and Rare Pearls

⁴ Comfort in Sorrow, Christian Focus, 2002, p. 11

⁵ Murray, Iain. *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2002. 442.

CH Spurgeon sums up the first chapter of Ruth very well: “Those who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls.

God has some things He wants to do through you, but He has to crush you to get you ready. This is God’s way.

Think of **Moses**, cast out of Egypt at 40 and then 40 years in the wilderness. But then came the burning bush.

Think of **Joseph**, thrown away into a pit, and then into slavery in Potiphar’s house, and then into a prison. It was only after he suffered that he was ready for a palace.

May the Lord help us to say with the Psalmist in **Psalm 119:71**, “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” If we dive deep into the sea of affliction, let us look for God’s pearls!