
Walking in Faith

DAVE BAST

Critics have called the book of Ruth the loveliest short story in world literature. It is a story about love and loyalty, faith and providence; and best of all, it has a happy ending. Ruth herself displays great virtues. She is courageous, pure, hardworking, patient, wise, faithful, but most of all, she is loving; and among all of her other graces, it is Ruth's persistent love and devotion to her adopted mother, Naomi, that shines through the story; but this is more than just a story, even about loyalty and love and happy endings. It is actually a story about the way God uses ordinary people to advance his plan to redeem and restore the world. So, join us on *Groundwork* as we open the beautiful little book of Ruth together. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are beginning another series today on *Groundwork*. It is a series on the little book of Ruth. It is tucked in between the book of Judges and I and II Samuel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; one of what? I think there are only two books in the Bible, right, with women's names: Esther and Ruth; I think that is right.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I hadn't thought of that, but you are right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this one is...Esther is a curious book because God is never mentioned in that particular story. Ruth is a very different book because it is shot through with the providence of God, and as we will be seeing in this series, it ultimately leads to something really, really important in the plan of salvation; but, we should remind ourselves how the book opens and where we are in Israel's history when this happens. So, the book begins in the days when the Judges ruled.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That tells us where we are.

DAVE BAST

Where we are and who we are. Another thing struck me just now as you were talking about the women's names. Ruth is one of the very few books, if not the only book in the Bible, whose main character and hero is not a Jew.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, we will see how that unfolds; but in the days of the Judges, if you remember something about the book of Judges, you know that it was basically a time of lawlessness. There was no central authority. There were repeated invasions from Israel's enemies, and these sort of regional heroes would pop up, and for a little while they might chase the enemies away, but then the chaos kind of returned; and at the end of the book of Judges, in fact, the very last sentence before the first sentence of Ruth it says that there was no king in Israel and everyone did as they pleased or as they saw fit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Everyone was right in their own eyes, as a different translation puts it. So, it was kind of the Wild West. It was kind of lawless in Israel. We don't have a king yet. We haven't had Saul yet, much less David; and so, God's law isn't being followed the way it was supposed to be. God sent the judges, people like Deborah and Barak and Samson, to try to foray into the society, but it was a chaotic time, and yet, this is a story about very ordinary people doing very ordinary things. Even during an extraordinary time of lawlessness, this is a story about some very good and faithful people.

DAVE BAST

Right; and kind of the message of life goes on. All of these big events may be happening in your country, but out in the villages, you know, it is the ordinary course of things: Marriages and births and deaths, and trying to find enough to eat and trying to find work and get along.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the stuff of everyday life.

DAVE BAST

The stuff of everyday life. So, let's listen to the story as it opens, and in the very opening, after that line about in the days of the Judges, we learn that there is trouble in one particular family.

So, we read that ^{Ruth 1:1} there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ²The man's name was Elimelech; his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah, and they went to Moab and lived there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we are in a town that is going to gain great significance later in the Bible...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Bethlehem—Beit Lechem in Hebrew means the house of bread, but there is no bread in the house of bread. Bethlehem, like the rest of Judah, is enduring a famine; so this man, Elimelech and his wife Naomi, and their two boys move to the nearby country of Moab because there is better eating there, they hope...

DAVE BAST

Presumably, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, they go there hoping to find life, and it doesn't quite turn out that way. Things only get worse for this family once they get to Moab.

DAVE BAST

Right. It is interesting, I read in a commentary, the meaning of names, Mahlon and Chilion—those two sons—are sickly and failing...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, dear.

DAVE BAST

So, look where we are going there. They get to Moab and no sooner do they arrive there then Elimelech dies first of all, and her sons marry Moabite women; presumably because that is who was available.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But then they both die, too; and so Naomi is left. She has lost her husband, she has lost both of her sons, she has these two daughters-in-law.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so now Naomi is a widow. Her daughters-in-law are widows. This is a very vulnerable position to be in in the ancient world; and so, everything that they had hoped to find in Moab: Food, life, sustenance, and maybe a new beginning, who knows, seems to have just spiraled right into the ground. So, things are looking pretty bad, but then we are reading on here in Ruth Chapter 1. By the time the story goes a little bit, we read: 1:6^bWhen Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them...

So back in Israel the famine has ended. So, Naomi hears this and she and her daughters-in-law prepare to return from there:

1:7With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

DAVE BAST

Yes, so here is the first bit of good news we get in this story. Suddenly somehow Naomi gets word: Hey, the famine is over. The rains have come. There is food once again. The crops are growing in Bethlehem. She decides: I am going to go back home and see what can happen there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; at least go back to what is familiar. I know my mother-in-law's father died of a tragic accident when she was just 11, and that left my wife's grandmother with five or six kids in the middle of California. What do you do? You are in a desperate situation. Your husband has died, what do you do? So she went home. She went back to Iowa where she was from because that was more familiar, and maybe she would be able to provide for her children there; and Naomi is doing the same thing. She is basically saying: Things have bottomed out here in Moab. I am a foreign woman living in a foreign land, which makes her vulnerable, too. She is not going to get and special treatment from the Moabites. Better to go home, back to Judah, back to Bethlehem, back to where she has some family, and now apparently some food.

DAVE BAST

So far it has been a pretty sad story, but here is a really interesting little detail that we read in Chapter 1 verse 7 of Ruth:

With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

So, for some reason, these two young women, also both widows, decide to stick with Naomi and head back to Judah with her, where they are going to be foreigners.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is an interesting twist in the story, if you know this story and where it is headed in the book of Ruth; that is where we will head, too, in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are beginning a four-part series on the four-chapter book of Ruth; and for this program we are staying right in Chapter 1. We have seen that Naomi and her husband Elimelech went to Moab with two sons. They both got married there, but in fairly short order Elimelech and both boys die. Now Naomi, with Orpah and Ruth, the two daughters-in-law from Moab, are heading back to Judah; but at one point, Naomi turns to the two girls and says: What are you doing? It is nice of you to follow me, but there is no hope for you in Israel. You are going to be foreign widows in a foreign land. There is no hope, so turn back, turn back, turn back. Orpah, at least, is willing to do so, but not Ruth; and so, we get to the middle here, of Ruth Chapter 1:

¹⁶But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go; 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 will I be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” So, there is the most famous verse from the book of Ruth.

DAVE BAST

Yes; by far, right. Famous words that are often...I at least have heard them used in marriage ceremonies or quoted or cited: Where you go I will go...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Your God will be my God; your people, my people; your home, my home; and nothing but death will separate us; and you know, it is hard to explain why Ruth would commit herself to Naomi like this. As you said, Scott, Orpah did the sensible thing. I mean, Naomi said to them: Look, there is no future with me. I am old. Do I have more sons that I can give you that...and even if I did, she says, talking about this...this is another little bit of foreshadowing in the book of Ruth, she alludes to the practice that in Israel according to the Law of Moses, if a man died childless his brother should marry the wife and produce an heir for him...for the dead man; and that is going to figure very prominently in the story of Ruth; but Naomi says: Look, even if I could have...even if I had a husband and could have a son tomorrow, are you going to wait 20 years for him to grow up? By then, you will be too old. So, this is a dead end. You might as well go back to your home and family; and Orpah does the sensible thing; but Ruth...Ruth says: No, I will never leave you; and somehow it is connected, too, with Naomi’s God; that Ruth has chosen, against all odds, to cast her lot with the people of Israel and with the God of Israel; and she even mentions him as the Lord. She uses his covenant name here in her famous pledge. So, somehow...you know, presumably they have been explaining to Ruth who the true God is, and she has bought into it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And her choice makes no sense. I mean, Orpah did the sensible thing. Now, maybe Ruth didn’t have any family left in Moab. Maybe her parents were dead, too, we don’t know. Maybe she didn’t have any siblings, we don’t know; but she is definitely doing an act of tremendous loyalty, tremendous faithfulness, tremendous love, in saying to Naomi: I am with you. You are my mom. You are my family now; and I know that neither

of us have good prospects even when we get back to Israel. I know that, but I am going to stay with you. Of course, it is also very, very true that Naomi did not have anything, and we are going to see this a little bit more also in the next program in this series. We will explore that a little bit more; but back in those days, a widow like Naomi quite literally...now, with no sons, no husband, no men in her life, and it is a patriarchal culture we have to remember, we don't live like that so much today, but it was a patriarchal culture. You've got no men in your life, you don't have much life. You don't have much of a chance; and so again, Ruth isn't making a sensible choice here, but maybe she is making a very Godlike choice here of being faithful.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think that is the key word: Faithful, faith. How do you explain faith? How do you explain people who, when it doesn't seem like there is any payoff to be realized, commit themselves to the God of the Bible? I think of people who I know from cultures where Christianity is very much a despised and persecuted faith. They become followers of Jesus when it is going to cause them all kinds of trouble, and as far as they can see, there is no good that is going to come out of it, humanly speaking, certainly not in physical terms, not in material terms, but they have fallen in love with the Lord, and so they cast their lot with him and with his people, with the body of Christ. I see that is exactly what Ruth is doing here, and ultimately maybe you can talk about God's grace and somehow the Holy Spirit inspires her, but it is an act of tremendous faith and it is a beautiful thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is a reason. We said earlier...those verses I just read earlier: Your people will be my people; your God, my God; there is a reason that is famous even beyond the bounds of the book of Ruth. There is a reason why, even though it is clearly not a wedding text. It has nothing to do with marriage; but nevertheless, a lot of brides and grooms have chosen to have this be the text for the meditation at their ceremony because they are such soaring words; there is such lyricism and beauty to that kind of tenacity and that kind of faithfulness. It is kind of a vignette of the God of Israel himself, who stuck with these people even though they didn't deserve it, again and again and again and again, but he finally will bring his Messiah; and oh, as we know, he will bring the Messiah through the family line of Ruth. So, what you get there...one of the reasons those words pop out of the book of Ruth and get put on greeting cards and counted cross stitch wall hangings and repeated at weddings is because they are among the Bible's most soaring words of faithfulness; and in a way they do, they encapsulate, they mirror, in small, what God does in big. You know, the big things of God's faithfulness. So, I think that is why we are drawn to Ruth, for that kind of loyalty, which, even though she may be a new believer in the God of Israel, she seems to be getting something of God's style in her own life.

DAVE BAST

Right. One of the interesting things about this story is the viewpoint of the narrator. Just from a literary standpoint you can ask yourself of this or any short story or novel, who is the narrator and what is the narrator's viewpoint? In this case, the narrator is omniscient, so this story is being told...we the readers know what is going on, and we know what is going to happen, but the characters don't know that. So, Ruth makes this tremendous act of commitment when she does not know that there is a happy ending in store for her. She cannot see... It is like the way we live our lives. We cannot see...where it goes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Moment to moment, you don't know.

DAVE BAST

Right; but we know what is ahead and we know what is ahead, not only for her, but for Naomi as well. We are going to look at their homecoming in Bethlehem, and how Naomi in particular reacts to that.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are, Dave, approaching now the end of Ruth Chapter 1 in this first program of a four-part series on Ruth. We know now that Ruth and Naomi are headed back to Bethlehem. They come back to town. People pay attention. People are stirred, and we read this in Ruth 1:

¹⁹So the two women went on and they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?”

So, she has been gone for about a decade, I think we read earlier...

DAVE BAST

Easily, yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

She has been gone for about ten years, but she probably looks crestfallen, and yes, I guess that is Naomi, but boy, it looks like she has been through the wringer, is kind of what I think people are saying.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and her homecoming is quite bittersweet; in fact, literally bittersweet as we read on: ²⁰“Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. (Naomi means pleasant; we have a lot of name meanings in this story.) “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them, “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.” (Mara means bitterness.) ²¹“I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we are now almost to the end of Ruth Chapter 1, and we are seeing that, indeed, Naomi just kind of feels hollowed out. She feels like God has done this to her, that God has dealt her a very, very bad hand in life, and she is bitter about it, she is angry about it, and she is a little...it looks like she is a little angry at God about it, and you know, you can see why. You serve the covenant God of Israel; you are a faithful person; you expect that God will...he doesn’t have to do everything for you, but he doesn’t have to take away your husband and both of your sons and any prospects for a future. So, yes, it is a very, very sad moment in this book. Naomi, and Ruth right with her, have hit bottom.

DAVE BAST

And I think most of us can identify with her—the bitterness of life that sometimes happens. I mean, that line that jumps out at me is when she says: I went out full, I came back empty.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is very sad.

DAVE BAST

And you just think of people who have experienced life that way, you know. A young couple falls in love and they get married, and maybe they quote this verse from Ruth; but then the years pass and they grow more distant and love seems to die, and the marriage ends. They went out full and they came back empty, you know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and it happens all the time. You embark on what you think is, and maybe what is, a promising career. You get a good job, and then all of a sudden you get a new boss who just doesn't like you; and now, all of a sudden you get fired or your life is just made a misery so you have to end up quitting; and what looked to be full of promise ended up being empty of promise; and people do become bitter; and there are some people who kind of get stuck there, too. I mean, as Lewis Smedes once said: There are certain people in this world who are so curdled in their bitterness of how things went that if you talk to them for more than a minute and a half, you are going to hear about how unfair life has been and who did it to them and who fired them and how they got swindled out of this or that...part of their retirement account. This happens, so we can identify with Naomi here, and Ruth right along with her. We have been there. This is a story about all of us.

DAVE BAST

And you know, those of us whose life is pretty full had better not judge those who have been emptied out of hope or of love or of joy and are experiencing that kind of bitterness; but one thing about Naomi really stands out here, I think, when we think about her faith. It is very interesting again to read what she says carefully and closely. She mentions God four times in this complaint that she makes to her old friends from Bethlehem, the women of Bethlehem, when she says: Call me Mara—call me bitter—don't call me pleasant—don't call me Naomi; but four times she says: God has done this to me. The Almighty, she calls him two times that: El Shaddai, which is a name expressing God's power and kind of control over life. The Almighty has done this to me; but twice she calls him the Lord—that covenant name again, that name that speaks of God's love and promise.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, Yahweh, yes. And so what that means here is that Naomi remains a person of faith, and this makes her a direct heir of all the psalms of lament, because as we...you know, I think we have looked at some psalms of lament before here on *Groundwork*, or maybe you have heard your pastor preach sermons on them; the great, striking thing about the psalms of lament...even the ones that say God is far away, God has forgotten me, how long must I suffer...the psalms of lament are still addressed to God. These are *not* agnostics, these are not atheists. Atheists and agnostics don't write psalms of lament, people of faith do...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because we are saying, you know, God is absent and I am telling it to God's face that you are absent; and so, Naomi is clearly still a person of faith. She is angry with God right now. She is disappointed with God right now, as we all sometimes are if we are honest; but she has not given up on God. She thinks God has set the chessboard against her, but she still has not given up on the language of faith.

DAVE BAST

And she hasn't kind of taken the easy way out and say: Well, God didn't do this. God had nothing to do with this. This was the devil who did this to me, or this was just bad luck and God, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or God did it to me, but he had a reason, so it is okay, I am not going to complain.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; she doesn't go to any of those explanations. She just hangs on to the...basically what she is saying is the prayer we learned as little kids: God is great and God is good; and you need to maintain both of those truths that, yes, God is still in control. He is the one overseeing my life, but he is also still good, and I don't get it; I don't understand it; but I believe both those things.

I think of William Cooper's great hymn: *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*: Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face. So, somehow Naomi sees that behind the bad things that have happened there is still the Lord who loves her.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is another example real quickly, and the psalms of lament testify to this, too. Sometimes I think in the Church we are given the message: You may never be disappointed in God. That is just not right. You should never be ticked off at God, no, no, no.

You know, the example of Naomi, the example of all of the psalms of lament and those psalmists is that God can take it; God can take it when we are mad at him; but the chapter is not quite done.

DAVE BAST

No, one more verse, and it is a key one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, 22:

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

DAVE BAST

I sense a happy ending coming. The barley harvest is beginning. Stay tuned as we continue to follow this beautiful story of Ruth in our next program.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always like to know how we can help you dig deeper into the scriptures. So go to our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages for future *Groundwork* programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/walking-in-faith>

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