

A Woman of True Love

Message 01 of 04 in the series: "Ruth: A Story of Valor, True Love, and Redemption"

A. Some helpful background information:

The story of Ruth takes place in the days when judges ruled Israel. It was a time of moral/spiritual decline, idolatry, and anarchy. "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." Judges 21:25 (NLT)

Women at that time were dependent upon male family members to protect and provide for them. Widows without male family members were particularly vulnerable often facing utter poverty and even starvation.

Centuries earlier God had promised to bless, protect, and provide for all of the Israelites in the Promised Land as long as they remained faithful to Him. Moses had also warned them that if they turned away from the LORD and began worshiping other gods, they would suffer terrible consequences. "...if you love the LORD your God and serve him with all your heart and soul, then he will send the rains in their proper seasons... He will give you lush pastureland for your livestock, and you yourselves will have all you want to eat. But be careful. Don't let your heart be deceived so that you turn away from the LORD and serve and worship other gods. If you do, the LORD's anger will burn against you. He will shut up the sky and hold back the rain, and the ground will fail to produce its harvests. Then you will quickly die in that good land the LORD is giving you." Deuteronomy 11:13b-17 (NLT)

Life Application: Whenever we wander far away from God, the right thing to do is repent and return.

"...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."
2 Chronicles 7:14 (NIV)

B. Tough times reveal priorities and character.

1. Elimelech, whose name ironically means "My God is King", made a disastrous decision to leave the plot of land God had given him near Bethlehem in order to seek greener pastures in Moab.

"In the days when the judges ruled in Israel, a severe famine came upon the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah left his home and went to live in the country of Moab, taking his wife and two sons with him. The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in the land of Judah. And when they reached Moab, they settled there. Then Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons. The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth. But about ten years later, both Mahlon and Kilion died. This left Naomi alone, without her two sons or her husband."

Ruth 1:1-5 (NLT)

Life Application: God wants us to turn to Him first when we face hard times.

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matthew 6:31-33 (NIV)

2. Naomi, whose name ironically means "pleasant", decided to return home alone in despair, self-pity, and bitterness, blaming God for all of her troubles.

"Then Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had blessed his people in Judah by giving them good crops again. So Naomi and her daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab to return to her homeland. With her two daughters-in-law she set out from the place where she had been living, and they took the road that would lead them back to Judah. But on the way, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back to your mothers' homes. And may the Lord reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. May the Lord bless you with the security of another marriage.' Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept. 'No,' they said. 'We want to go with you to your people.' But Naomi replied, 'Why should you go on with me? Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands? No, my daughters, return to your parents' homes, for I am too old to marry again. And even if it were possible, and I were to get married tonight and bear sons, then what? Would you wait for them to grow up and refuse to marry someone else? No, of course not, my daughters! Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord himself has raised his fist against me.' And again they wept together, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Ruth clung tightly to Naomi. 'Look,' Naomi said to her, 'your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You should do the same.' But Ruth replied, 'Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will

live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!" When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more. So the two of them continued on their journey. When they came to Bethlehem, the entire town was excited by their arrival. "Is it really Naomi?" the women asked. "Don't call me Naomi," she responded. "Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me?" Ruth 1:6-21 (NLT)

Warning! Self-pity and bitterness are poisonous to us and toxic to relationships. Worse yet, they will continue to grow if we focus on our problems and ourselves instead of the Lord.

"Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many."
Hebrews 12:15b (NLT)

"You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you! Trust in the Lord always, for the Lord God is the eternal Rock." Isaiah 26:3-4 (NLT)

3. Ruth, who ironically was from Moab where people worshiped the contemptible idol Chemosh, distinguished herself as a godly woman of "heséd" (loyalty, faithfulness, true love).

"Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!"

Ruth 1:16-17 (NLT)

Life Application: We have opportunities every day to show true love to each other.

"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance." 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NLT)

C. God loves new beginnings.

"So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by her daughter-in-law Ruth, the young Moabite woman. They arrived in Bethlehem in late spring, at the beginning of the barley harvest." Ruth 1:22 (NLT)

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." 1 Peter 1:3 (NIV)

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Connect Group Questions

Read Ruth 1 and then discuss the following questions:

1. In Deuteronomy 11:13-17, Moses warned the people of Israel not to worship other gods, but they didn't listen. Why not? Why do you think we turn away from God today?
2. When going through hard times, to whom can you relate best – Elimelech, the pragmatist; Naomi, the person who said she had it worse than anyone else; or Ruth, the person whose love shone the brightest in the darkest hour?
3. Discuss the following ironies:
 - Bethlehem means "House of Bread", yet there was no food.
 - Elimelech means "My God is King", yet he seemed to have made career/family decisions without consulting God at all.
 - Naomi means "pleasant", yet she was filled with bitterness and self-pity.
 - Ruth was from Moab where the people practiced idolatry and sexual immorality, yet she was the most godly person in the family.
4. Who is the most loving, loyal person you know? Describe him/her. What is their secret?
5. Read Hebrews 12:15. What does a root of bitterness look like? How do we get rid of bitterness once it takes root in our lives?
6. How have you experienced God's desire for new beginnings in your life?