

Theme: When suffering comes into our lives, it is hard to see God's purposes clearly, but He will bring us through the bitter valley to restore our hope.

I. Intro - Epic Stories

- A. Classical Mind virtual book club on the Western Canon
- B. LONG epic books - Iliad; Aeneid; LOTR; Russian books!
- C. Short epic books - Brave New World; Oedipus Rex
- D. Ruth is a very short but epic story
 - 1. Great characters, drama, struggle, redemption
 - 2. Amazing, subtle writing, literary devices
 - 3. Deep theological truths and motifs
- E. Redeeming Love - The Book of Ruth

II. In the Bitter Valley

- A. The tumultuous time of the Judges (v1)
 - In the days when the judges ruled... Ruth 1:1

 - In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. Judges 21:25
 - 1. When no king ruled (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25)
 - 2. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes - a very negative assessment of this period (17:6 too)
 - 3. The whole book is full of ups and downs, but Judges 17-21 paint a picture of moral and national chaos.
 - 4. The book of Ruth will drill down on one family
- B. The time of famine (v1)

In the days when the judges ruled, **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. Ruth 1:1

- 1. Famine strikes the land - perhaps God's discipline
 - 2. There is famine in "the house of bread" (Bethlehem)
 - 3. This family leaves the promised land to find food
 - 4. Similar to Jacob going to Egypt because of famine
- C. Elimelech and his family go to Moab (Ruth 1:1-2)
- In the days when the judges ruled, 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.** ² The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And **they went to Moab and lived there.** Ruth 1:1-2
- 1. Elimelech (My God is King) takes his family to Moab
 - 2. A journey of about 50 miles (Map)
 - 3. Moab and Israel have a complicated relationship
 - a. Moab comes the family of Lot; Israel was not to conquer their land (Deuteronomy 2:9)
 - b. But the King of Moab hired Balaam to curse Israel (Numbers 22); worshiped the evil god Chemosh (Numbers 21:29)
 - c. Moabites not allowed in the assembly of Israel!
No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. Deuteronomy 23:3
 - d. Many would hear this choice with horror! Why would they go there? Can any good come from Moab?

D. The exile to Moab - the bitter valley (vv3-5)

Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and **Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.** Ruth 1:3-5

1. Elimelech dies and Naomi is left a widow in Moab
2. Mahlon and Kilson marry Moabite women!
3. After 10 years, the sons die too - Naomi is alone!
4. Naomi is left empty and utterly vulnerable
 - a. Widows had no finances or job - and often no food!
 - b. Naomi's sons were gone - the only ones who could help!
 - c. She was in a foreign land - Moab!
 - d. In Hebrew, she is not named in v5 - just 'the woman'
5. This exile from the land is the opposite of Jacob
 - a. He entered Egypt as 75 or so; left as millions
 - b. She entered as a family and is left alone!
6. Has God forgotten Naomi in the bitter valley?

III. Beginning the Journey Home

A. Naomi hears the Lord has helped Israel (vv6-7)

When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷ 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. Ruth 1:6-7

1. Finally, some good news - the Lord ends the famine!
2. Surprisingly, Orpah and Ruth decide to go with her!
3. Perhaps this will bring Naomi out of the bitter valley

B. Naomi tries to send Orpah and Ruth back (vv8-13)

1. Naomi urges the girls to go back to Moab (8)
2. She even blesses them in the name of the Lord (v9)
3. Surprisingly, they choose to stay with her! (vv9-10)
4. Perhaps this will bring Naomi out of the bitter valley!
5. But Naomi continues to press them (vv11-13)
6. She is so deep in the valley she can't see their faithfulness or even receive their help!
7. Eventually Orpah agrees and goes back home (v14)

C. Ruth's amazing response and words!

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." Ruth 1:16-17

1. Ruth (name related to covenant) makes a covenant!
2. One of the most beautiful passages in literature!
3. Ruth clung to Naomi (v14) - same word as Genesis 2:24 - and made a lifelong vow!
4. If anything could encourage Naomi, this would be it! Who could find a more faithful person to walk with?

IV. The Crisis of Faith in the Bitter Valley

A. Naomi's crisis of faith (vv20-21)

"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 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."
Ruth 1:20-21

1. A play on words reveals a crisis of faith in Naomi
 2. Naomi means 'pleasant', but Mara means 'bitter'
 3. I went away full, Yahweh brought me back empty!
 4. Yahweh afflicted me; He brought misfortune/did evil!
 5. Yahweh's hand went out against me! (v13)
 6. Naomi's faith seems shattered at this point!
 7. She feels utterly abandoned and has no hope of a seed, similar to when Cain killed Abel, or when Sarah could not conceive.
 8. She feels God's promises have failed - and Yahweh may be actively working against her!
 9. This causes her to even misperceive things
 - a. She did not go out full - there was famine!
 - b. As we will see, Ruth's presence is critical!
 10. This is the picture of a broken, shattered woman
- B. There are glimmers of hope even in the valley!
So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. Ruth 1:22

1. She is back in Judah, not in Moab!
2. Ruth has stayed with her!
3. The barley harvest is beginning - and God will provide for them!
4. Tune in next time to see how God will restore Naomi and Ruth!

V. Applying the Word

A. The reality of the bitter valley

1. Naomi had suffered severe blows!
2. Life has ups and downs for us all in this fallen world
3. There is NO secret way to avoid such trials
4. This is not even due to sin - God says Job's trials were NOT because of any sin on his part!
5. But God walks with us through the valley!
6. True faithfulness is learning to walk with God through mountains and valleys, feast and famine, joy and grief.

B. A proper response to the bitter valley

1. Cry out to God in prayer! (After Hours - laments)
 - a. We can be honest with God about our pain, grief, doubts, and fears - He will not reject us!
 - b. We need to walk with God in the valley - not try to make it on our own!
2. We need faithful friends with us in the valley!

- a. We all need a Ruth who will stand with us through thick and thin!
- b. Job's friends were terrible during his valley, but Ruth was a godly, faithful friend and companion to Naomi.
- c. We should never isolate when we are in the valley!
- d. God gives us friends to help us through the valley!
A friend loves at all times, and a relative is born to help in adversity. Proverbs 17:17
- e. This is why connect groups are critical - we are not created to go it alone!

3. Look for signs of God's faithfulness

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.
Ruth 1:22

- a. Naomi could not see God was already at work - but he was!
 - 1. She felt exiled - but God already brought her home!
 - 2. She felt alone, but God gave her Ruth!
 - 3. She felt empty, but the barley harvest was beginning!
- b. Everything God was going to use to restore and bless Naomi was already in place, but she was not seeing any of it!
- c. Even in our grief, doubt, and pain, we need to look for signs of God's faithful work - it is there!
- d. This is yet another reason we need friends - they can cry with us, but also help us to see God's hand at work!

C. The Table of God's Faithful Provision

- 1. This Table reminds us of the faithfulness of God

- 2. This Table is God's Provision for us, even in the valley!
- 3. Here we feast, even if we are surrounded by enemies!
- 4. Come and receive God's provision!
- 5. Response song: I Will Follow

Through the Bitter Valley

Ruth 1

September 7, 2025

Communion/ I Will Follow

Numbers 6:24-26

Teaching keywords: Sorrow; suffering; grieving; providence; sovereignty of God; hope; biblical characters

The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. Numbers 6:24-26

In the days when the judges ruled, 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. ² The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³ Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷ 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.

⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?"

¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me — even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons — ¹³ would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!"

¹⁴ At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." ¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

¹⁹ So the two women went on until 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?" ²⁰ "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 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." ²² So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. Ruth 1:1-22