

Ruth 1 (1984 NIV)

Where's God in Tough Times?

Introduction

The story is told of a man who came across a map of the world while reading the newspaper.

He cut the map out into pieces, and asked his young son to put the map together like a jig-saw puzzle.

After a while, the boy exclaimed, "Dad, I have done it!"

The father was surprised and asked, "So soon? How did you do it?"

The boy replied, "I turned the pieces over and found out that a man's picture was on the reverse side. So I put the man together ... and the world was right!"

Isn't it true that whether things in your world are going on right or falling apart depends very much on how you are pulling yourself together? And how well we are pulling ourselves together often depends on how we view God in our circumstances.

It will be wonderful to be able to say all the time, "I can sense that God is with me and for me in all of life's situations." But the reality in life is that this is not so all the time. There are times when we cry out and say, "Where's God in all of this? Why is God so hard on me?"

In Ruth 1, we see how two women view God in the common circumstances they face together. Both have become widows and do not have any children with them. These two women are Naomi and Ruth.

Before we look at their different responses related to their view of God in their common circumstances, let's take a quick preview of all the four chapters of Ruth.

- In Ruth 1, we see a family (a man, his wife, and two sons) seeking for better times in Moab because of a famine in Bethlehem. At a later time, all the males in this family have died, leaving only their wives behind. Two of these women—Naomi and one of her daughters-in-law Ruth—decide to return to Bethlehem.
- In Ruth 2, we come to a harvest field. There we see Boaz and Ruth meet and it is love at first sight for them.
- In Ruth 3, we see Boaz and Ruth together talking under the night stars. We hear a moving conversation between these two who have fallen in love.

- Ruth 4, we see Boaz and Ruth getting married after the man (a kinsman-redeemer) who's supposed to have the prior responsibility to marry Ruth to carry on the family line has refused to do so. This story that begins with the death of all the men in a family ends beautifully with Ruth giving birth to a son as she starts a new family.

Indeed, the story of Ruth is a story about God's redemptive grace. It begins with famine and death, but ends with harvest and birth.

Today, as we take a look at Ruth 1, we must not miss this one important point stressed throughout the story—i.e. we are no fools to rest our faith in a caring God because He is there with us no matter what.

I. Ruth 1 opens with hardship, suffering, grief, and loss (vv. 1-5).

1 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.

This story took place during the period of the judges—a time of chaos and humiliation for Israel as her enemies had often succeeded in putting the Israelites under their subjection. Not only that, we are told that even the climate decided to join in the oppression and sent the region of Bethlehem into a severe famine.

Then we see how a man leading his wife and two sons into the land of Moab in order to survive the famine. The man's name was Elimelech ("My God is King") and the wife's name was Naomi ("Pleasant").

The people in Moab were descendants of Lot from his incestuous relationship with his firstborn daughter (Gen. 19:30-38). These Moabites were also enemies of the Israelites because of the way they had mistreated them during their freedom journey from Egypt to Canaan (Deut. 23:3-6; Num. 22-25). Also during the time of the judges, Moab had invaded Israel and ruled over them for 18 years (Judges 3:12-14).

Now, as if it was a sign of divine disapproval, Elimelech and his two sons (who got married in Moab) died tragically, leaving behind their wives. Naomi had two sons who died in the prime of their lives. Imagine the deep sense of pain, loss, fear, and uncertainty that must have gripped her.

In the light of these circumstances before them, how did Naomi and Ruth view God?

II. We see one set of circumstances, but two views about God (vv. 6-22).

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.

We see Naomi viewing God as against her in her circumstances.

But Naomi did believe in the sovereignty of God—nothing could happen outside the will of God. God's so powerful that He could do whatever He would choose. Naomi took God seriously—the famine in Bethlehem was gone because God "had come to the aid of His people" (v. 6). God did something and the famine was God.

Because Naomi took God seriously, she called upon God to bless her daughters-in-law two times—“May the LORD show kindness to you ...” (v. 8); “May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband” (v. 9).

Yes, Naomi believed in God and His sovereign control. She must have asked that the famine be over quickly so that they could return home. She must have asked that God would safeguard the lives of her husband and two sons.

But the famine did not end quickly, but dragged on for 10 long years. Her husband and two sons died in spite of her many prayers before God for them. In the face of these circumstances, Naomi made her conclusion—God in His sovereignty had chosen to be against her. That’s why she said to her two daughters-in-law: “May the LORD show kindness to you [not us] ...” (v. 8); “May the LORD grant that each of you [not us] will find rest ...” (v. 9).

It seems that Naomi had concluded that God had chosen to be against her. She then stopped praying for God’s favour to be upon herself. Now, the problem with Naomi is not that she had stopped believing God, but she believed God to the point of bemeaning herself—i.e. she was not precious to God anymore; in His sovereign prerogative, God had chosen not to love her; she then stopped seeking God’s blessings for herself, but only of her two daughters-in-law.

Story is told of a man who had a very defeated and negative view of himself. He went to a counsellor for help.

When asked to voice his problem, he said: “I feel that I’m so utterly useless that I’m only fit for the trash bin.”

The counsellor corrected him quickly without thinking: “Don’t talk rubbish!”

The troubled man then responded with a big smile: “Thank you for affirming me. I feel better already—I’m truly fit for the trash bin because I even talk rubbish.”

You see, once we have made some conclusion about ourselves with a closed mind, we become victims of our own distorted self-perception. Same too with Naomi—she had concluded that God had chosen to be against her as she interpreted the circumstances that she was facing together with her daughters-in-law. And once she had concluded that God would not help her out of her circumstances, the only person she could then depend on was herself.

Note what her two daughters-in-law (Orpah and Ruth) said in v. 10: “We will go back with you to your people.” They both wanted to go with Naomi back to Bethlehem to join the community of God’s people there.

Imagine someone saying to you, “I want to be a Christian like you. Can you tell me how I can be one?” What would you say?

“Don’t be crazy! Go and be faithful to your own god. Forget about becoming a Christian!” Would you say that?

But this was how Naomi responded to her daughters-in-law when they both wanted to follow her back to Bethlehem to be a part of God’s people there. In effect, Naomi said to them:

- “Don’t be stupid. No one in Israel would want to marry women like you both because you are from Moab. You have no chance of remarrying in Israel. So return to your own homes and at least you have a chance there.”
- “If I have sons, I’ll help you. But I’m too old to have sons. Even if I remarry and have sons, it’ll be too late for you when they become grown-ups.”
- “So go home and help yourselves while you are still young enough and have time.”

Yes, even though Orpah and Ruth had asked Naomi to allow them to go with her to Israel to join God’s people there, Naomi redirected them back to their own homes and own god in Moab. The Moabites were worshippers of the false god Chemosh, and child sacrifices were part of the worship ritual of this god. Imagine Naomi redirecting them back to this gruesome practice instead of worshipping the true God in Israel. Isn’t it true that when we conclude that we can only depend on ourselves to work through our problems, our perspectives can be grossly warped and distorted?

Some commentators have suggested that Naomi didn’t want Orpah and Ruth to return with her because they would be living proof that she and her husband had allowed their sons to marry foreign wives (something forbidden by the Mosaic Law). Hence, she was trying to cover up her tracks of disobedience by returning alone.

This might be possible, but the important thing to note here is that Naomi had such warped and distorted perspectives because she concluded that God had chosen to be against her. Thus, she now only had herself to depend on.

- In v. 13, she lamented: “... the LORD’s hand has gone out against me!”
- In vv. 20-21, she complained: “Don’t call me Naomi (“Pleasant”). Call me Mara (“Bitter”) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”
- Naomi had concluded that God didn’t love her; she now had to depend on herself to resolve her difficulties.

The truth that Naomi had failed to see in the midst of all she was going through is that she did not return home empty.

- She returned with Ruth.

- She returned with a woman who was a member of the ancestry line from which our Lord Jesus would come.
- She didn't return home empty, but she didn't see the fullness that God had blessed her with in the person of Ruth.
- God was not against her, but was with her all along.
- She was not able to see or even sense this because her focus was on her circumstances.
- This is always true—when our problem looks near and big, God seems so far and small in our lives.

In contrast to Naomi, we see Ruth had a very different view about God though she was going through the same circumstances. We see Ruth viewing God as worthy to rest her faith in regardless of her circumstances.

- In vv. 16-17, Ruth said to Naomi: "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. Where you 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."
- In essence, what Ruth was saying to Naomi is that God had given them each other. She might never have a husband again, but having Naomi was enough for her. She was happy with this relationship that God had given to them.
- As far as Ruth was concerned, God had been good to them by giving them each other. That's why she begged Naomi not to send her away, but to allow her to make her future with Naomi in Bethlehem among the people of God.

Naomi had focused on what she didn't have. She then became bitter and concluded that God had not loved her. In contrast, Ruth focused on what she had and was thankful.

- She had Naomi.
- She had known this God of Israel and wanted to worship Him as her God.

Ruth wanted to be a part of the community of God's people in Israel, never mind if it might not be easy for the Israelites to accept her Moabite ancestry. In short, Ruth wanted to make some lasting commitment in relationship with Naomi and with God. And she was willing to rest her faith in God to help her fulfil this.

Yes, I believe if we are thankful for the relationships that God has allowed us to establish, and if we are determined to make deep and lasting commitment in these relationships, there will be:

- Stronger marriages.
- Happier families.
- Closer neighbourliness.
- More trusting friendships.

- More healthy cooperation and less unhealthy competition.
- More openness and less suspicion.
- More giving and less taking.
- More consolation and less criticism.

In short, if more people have the same attitude as Ruth, the world would be a better place. If not, it becomes what it is, i.e. ruthless—cold, unkind, and lacking the warmth of human compassion.

Naomi concluded that God didn't love her, but under the same circumstances, Ruth saw things differently. Ruth saw what she had in life as gifts from God, and she was grateful. As such, her orientation towards life and the future was so full of faith, hope, and love.

- Naomi told her, "Go away. You have no future with me."
- But Ruth replied, "I want to come with you. In God, we can have a future together."

Note that in v. 22, we are told that Naomi returned to Bethlehem with Ruth at a time when the "barley harvest was beginning". It seems that as Naomi returned to Bethlehem to start a new beginning, God was showing her that she was not so empty after all. She returned not to a famine, but to a harvest in its beginning—the future would be full and fulfilling for her because God cared enough to provide. She would have to trust God and rest her faith in Him for a new beginning. God loved her and would be on her side with resources greater than she could imagine.

Conclusion

For many years at the University of Oklahoma, a very interesting project was going on. It had to do with a 15-year-old female chimpanzee named Washoe. She was taught how to talk by combining sign language with simple recognition.

Since 1966, Washoe had learned 140 signs. Finally, it was decided that she would be taught how to conceptualize—i.e. instead of imitating some person's words, she would express her own thoughts independently.

Washoe had been much pampered all this while in the university. She was well fed, physically comfortable, and protected from harm. She had security. But when she was able to put words together on her own, she repeatedly put these three words together—"Let me out."

We human beings are much like this chimp in this respect—instead of being thankful for what we already have, we often focus on what we do not have and become bitter in life even in our better days.

(<https://gentleworld.org/chimpanzee-voices-plea>)

But the Lord is teaching us today to view our circumstances with rested faith in God who cares for us and is with us both in better and bitter times.

I wonder what your circumstances in life are like today.

- Would you describe them as a season of “harvest”?
- Would you describe them as a season of “famine”?

Naomi left her home country in the beginning of Ruth 1 when there was a famine. She returned home at the end of Ruth 1 when there was a harvest at hand.

If you are discouraged today like Naomi, God is calling you to rest your faith in Him regardless of your circumstances. He cares enough to provide for you in ways you may not see or sense now. God will make a way as He prepares a harvest (a time of fruitfulness) for you when it is in His time for you to return from your famine (your time of fruitlessness).

Yes, God wants you and me to have the same beautiful attitude of Ruth—always exercising rested faith in Him even in tough times; always thankful to Him for whatever blessings we already have in terms of things and relationships, treasuring these in anticipation of better things to come in His time.

Regardless of what season it is in our life's pilgrimage today, let's all learn to live as people who are always loved by God as His people. Yes, we are no fools to rest our faith in a caring God because He is always there with us. And because God is always there with us and for us, let's decide this day to count our blessings, not our bruises, in all of life's situations.

Amen!