
Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: blank]** Pray

- † How many of you have read the book of Ruth? How many of you know where Ruth is in the Bible? Try to find it now. If you need help, you can use the table of contents in the front of the Bible. When I first read the book of Ruth, I wondered, “Why is this in the Bible?”

- † Some people see this as a romance. But I think the evidence is against it.
 - **[Slide 2: 4.13]** v.4.13 [NASB]: “So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.”
 - This is all the author says about any courtship, wedding, honeymoon, romance, whatever... and this sentence is about having a son. This definitely is not a romantic story about romantic love.

- † It might seem to be about personal loyalty, but so what? Why did God want this narrative in the Bible? As we will see, there is much more to this narrative than just an example of personal loyalty.
 - **[Slide 3: 4.22]** Understanding the significance of Ruth depends on understanding the significance of the last line: v.4.22 [NASB]: “and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David.”
 - Why is that significant? Ruth was King David’s great grandmother, and from David’s line of seed came Jesus; there are implications in all that, which we will get to in a couple of weeks.

- † **[Slide 4: two characters]** To understand the book of Ruth, we must analyze it as a narrative or story.
 - Yes, it is in the Bible and therefore it is true, but it also is presented as a narrative. So we have to study Ruth like we would study a gospel narrative, looking for literary clues from the author.
 - The human author, under divine guidance, has chosen to tell this narrative a certain way, including some information, leaving other information out, highlighting certain events and discussions, minimizing others.
 - We need to look at those clues to understand what he is saying to us. These clues probably were more clear to the author’s contemporary readers, but we have to search for them, because we do not have the same base knowledge or communication styles today.
 - So as we study Ruth, we not only will learn what God has revealed in this book, we also will learn more about how to study a biblical narrative, which should make this twice as rewarding.

- † Whenever you study biblical narratives, you should consider the names the author used; or if the names have not been changed to protect the innocent, then the names God chose for these people:
 - Elimilech means “My God is King” [which I think we’ll see must be ironic]
 - Naomi means “Pleasant” [this too will seem ironic]
 - Mahlon might come from the word meaning “weak” or “sickly” or from the Arabic word meaning “sterile.” [Chilion and Orpah are too difficult to translate.]
 - Ruth probably means “refreshment” or “comfort.”
 - Boaz means “Swift Strength”; there is significance to these names.

- † More importantly, we need to remember that dramatic narratives are all about tension: what the tension is, how the characters choose to resolve that tension, and what happens based on their choices is what drives the plot and theme of any narrative.
- Essentially, this is a narrative about two people – Ruth and Naomi – and how they used the Covenant promises of God in a time of tension.
 - This narrative has two recurring tensions: lack of food and lack of children. The children part is the deeper tension, which might be hard for us to understand, but in that culture the lack of children was felt as a personal curse from God and having children was felt as a personal blessing, a blessing which allowed the family line to continue, which was very important.
 - **[Slide 5: Deuteronomy 28.1-2]** These two tensions are interesting in themselves, because in the Mosaic Covenant which God had given to Israel, God had promised “fruitfulness” in both the field and the womb.
 - Deuteronomy 28.1-2, 11-12: “Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the LORD your God... **[Slide 6: Deuteronomy 28.11-12]** The LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. The LORD will open for you His good storehouse, the heavens, to give rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand...”
 - So the tension in the story will be that these people are not fruitful in either the womb or the field, which means they not only lack the blessings they desire, they lack blessings promised by God.

Verses 1:1-5

- † **[Slide 7: v.1.1a]** Let’s get to our text. I will be using the NASB all three weeks, because key words are important in parts of this study, and I don’t want to be jumping among translations. We start at the beginning, with the first sentence in 1.1:
- **1.1a: Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land.**
- † Understanding the book of Ruth depends largely on understanding this first sentence. The first thing the author does is point us to the time period, so it must be important. To understand the narrative, we need to understand its historical context. What do we know about the days of the judges?
- **[Slide 8: v.1.1a judges]** First, let’s consider when this time period is. God already has miraculously delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt through the Exodus; God also has given Moses the Law and the Mosaic Covenant for the nation; and God has given Israel victorious entrance into the promised land.
 - So the people have seen God’s reality and ability to deliver, they are in the land, and they have the law for their nation and both the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants with God. In terms of our Bibles, they had the first five books of the Old Testament. In this revelation, God had promised to provide for them if they were obedient, devoted, and dependent on him, but he promised to chastise them if they were not.
 - By the way, this is another example of how the whole Bible is thematically consistent. You might remember from our sermon three weeks ago, that the meaning of the Greek verb most often translated as “worship” in the New Testament means to prostrate yourself to show God your

submission, dependence, and devotion. That is what God wanted from his people in Israel, and it is what he wants from his people today.

- What else do we know about the days of the judges? Generally, the Jews were not obedient, devoted, and dependent on God: it was a time of basic lawlessness with a repeating cycle: sinful waywardness would bring discipline from God, then the people would cry out for help with repentance, which would bring blessing from God, and then they would start all over, slipping back into sin.
- Understanding this historical context – and the Law itself – will help us understand a lot of what happens in the narrative.

† **[Slide 9: v.1.1a famine]** So, “Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land.” We immediately have our first tension: lack of food. Why is there a famine, and how do we know?

- Look at v.6 and tell me who is in control of whether there is a famine: God. Most likely, God would have brought the famine due to general disobedience, as specified in the Mosaic Law. In both Leviticus and Deuteronomy, part of the covenant with God was that while they were obedient, dependent, and devoted, God would provide them with an abundance of food, but failure on the part of the people would bring God’s discipline, including famine.
- **[Slide 10: Leviticus 26.14-17a]** I want to share with you a striking passage, Leviticus 26.14-20, which shows how seriously God takes our decision of whether to walk with him: “But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you: I will appoint over you a sudden terror, consumption and fever that will waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you will sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies will eat it up. I will set My face against you so that you will be struck down before your enemies; [Slide 11: Leviticus 26.17b-20] and those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee when no one is pursuing you. If also after these things you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. I will also break down your pride of power; I will also make your sky like iron and your earth like bronze. Your strength will be spent uselessly, for your land will not yield its produce and the trees of the land will not yield their fruit.”
- So, knowing that this is what the Mosaic Law said, what God had promised would happen, and knowing what was going on in the time of the judges, we can conclude that God caused the famine due to the people’s waywardness and would end the famine if the people repented by turning to him in submission and dependence.

† **[Slide 12: Deuteronomy 30.1-2]** If God brought about this famine because of the waywardness of the people, how should the people have reacted when the famine began?

- They should have responded with repentance and trust in God’s provision. They had a covenant with God in which he promised to provide abundantly for them if they were obedient.
- Deuteronomy 30.1-5 offers an example of the most extreme case, of God getting so angry that he rips the people out of the promised land and scatters them to all the nations, and even then, if they would turn to him to repent and trust in him, he would restore them to the land and the covenantal promises: “So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, **[Slide 13: Deuteronomy**

30.3-5] then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. The LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers.”

- Even in this worst case scenario, if they would return to God – that is repent of their sinful waywardness – then God would again provide for them and restore them to the land; i.e. God would renew his covenant promises. Let’s see how our characters reacted when the famine hit...

† **[Slide 14: v.1.1b] 1.1: Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons.**

† It was a misty day when I took this picture, but you can see that Moab is easily visible across the Dead Sea from the land of Judah. I don’t think you could see Moab from Bethlehem itself, but certainly you could if you went a day’s walk in that direction. This family was suffering in famine, but likely could see that Moab still had fruitful fields, and that is why they went there.

† **[Slide 15: v.2] 1.2: 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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there.**

† Before we read on, I want to clarify two things.

- **[Slide 16: Bethlehem]** First, the name “Bethlehem” literally means “house of bread,” because they grew wheat and barley in the area, along with olives, almonds, and grapes. It is ironic that the house of bread could not feed its people. This town is up in the mountainous region, but the soil is fertile there. So while they could not plant endless fields like along the coast, they were a fertile part of Judah.
- Second, these people were Ephrathites, but that does not mean they should have been from Ephraim instead of Judah [where Bethlehem is]. V.4.11 clears that up, saying they were from Ephrathah, which was the name of many locales, and is close to the ancient name for Bethlehem, so it must refer here to the area around Bethlehem.

† **[Slide 17: map]** What do we know about Moab? We can look at the map and see its location. This mountainous region has a twenty-five mile wide fertile plateau. Perhaps the fertile Moabite plateau was – in God’s sovereignty – still producing food while Israel’s fields were not. Let’s look at a picture of that fertile plateau **[Slide 18: fertile plateau]**; that’s what they might have seen from Judah.

† The proper response to God’s discipline is repentance, to begin again obeying God’s commands and trusting in God’s provision. Did Elimelech’s actions suggest repentance and trust in God’s provision?

- No: He fled the covenantal promised land to seek food in Moab [v.1]. He did what seemed practical in human wisdom, but it went against what God had revealed as his will.
- Hundreds of years earlier, God had tested the trust and obedience of Abraham and Isaac with famines, and both of them failed by fleeing the promised land to seek help from foreigners instead of God. It is possible this famine was a test of faith instead of discipline from God, but probably not since the Mosaic Covenant was in place and the author made a point of telling us it was the time of the judges. However, even if it was a test instead of discipline, Elimelech and his

family would have failed the test by choosing to leave the promised land and seek provision from foreigners, instead of remaining and seeking provision from God.

- † **[Slide 19: Deuteronomy 23.3-6]** The Law will show us another problem with Elimelech's choice: where he chose to go.
 - Deuteronomy 23.3-6: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. Nevertheless, the LORD your God was not willing to listen to Balaam, but the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the LORD your God loves you. You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days.
 - So, Elimelech not only was failing to trust in God's provision, not only was fleeing the covenantal promised land, he also looked for sustenance in a place that was forbidden by God! That doesn't sound too repentant! I think we can expect that this lack of obedience and lack of trust would anger God. Now let's see how God dealt with Elimelech's unrepentant attitude...
- † **[Slide 20: v.1.3] 1:3: Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.**
- † It's no surprise that Elimelech died prematurely, given what we have just learned about the Mosaic Law from God.
 - Notice the storyteller's technique, what he included in the narrative; he has only a limited space, a scroll of parchment on which to write, so he has to choose his words carefully. He says, it is the time of the judges, God responds to the general disobedience with a famine, the family responds to the famine by leaving the promised land and seeking their own provision in a forbidden place, and God responds with death. All you need to know, and no more: this is very elegant writing!
- † **[Slide 21: v.1.4] 1:4: They [the two sons] took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years.**
- † Now the second tension: lack of children, to carry on the family line. Note again the responses to the tension: they responded by doing what they thought was practical, marrying local women, instead of seeking God's provision through his covenant.
- † What was God's opinion of Israelites marrying foreigners?
 - We know from Old Testament history that non-believing spouses would lead Israelites astray from the way of the True God; this happened even to Solomon, the wisest man!
 - **[Slide 22: Deuteronomy 7.1-2]** Deuteronomy 7:1-4: "When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. **[Slide 23: Deuteronomy 7.2-4]** You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you."

- This passage does not mention the Moabites, because they were not in Canaan, but it gives us the general idea that God did not want his people to marry foreigners who worshipped other gods, because God knew that these pagan spouses would lead his people astray. This is a good lesson for today too!
 - **[Slide 24: 1 Kings 11.1-2]** It is interesting to note that 1 Kings 11:1-2 refers to these verses when talking about Solomon's wives, and includes Moab as a forbidden source of spouses. So even if Moab was not written into the Law specifically in this situation, it was understood.
- † A little application question: Did Elimilech's sons stray far from the spiritual or physical path their father chose?
- No, they went with him to Moab; then continued his disobedience by marrying Moabite women. Our relationship with God will have a big impact on the relationships our children forge with God! This is a good life lesson for today! If you want to bless your children, don't worry so much about what Christmas gifts you can buy or how nice is your house or whether they get to go to Disney World. Get yourself healthy spiritually and right with God, and learn to walk with God consistently, this is the best blessing you can give to your children, letting them see that your faith is real and has real results.
 - So how did God respond to the sons marrying Moabite women?
- † **[Slide 25: v.1.5] 1.5: Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.**
- † These two sons were married to Moabite women for ten years, and neither had a child, which we know, because it is not mentioned in this story that is all about lack of seed, lack of food and children. Then both sons died. How do we know this was God's deliberate response, an indication of God's judgment? Because God promised them children if they were obedient:
- **[Slide 26: Deuteronomy 7.12-13]** Deuteronomy 7.12-14: "Then it shall come about, because you listen to these judgments and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you His covenant and His lovingkindness which He swore to your forefathers. He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, **[Slide 27: Deuteronomy 7.13-14]** your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock, in the land which He swore to your forefathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples; there will be no male or female barren among you or among your cattle."
 - So, no children for either wife after ten years, combined with the premature deaths of both men, gives us a strong indication of God's wrathful judgment.

Summary

- † **[Slide 28: narrative study]** At this point, let's summarize what we have learned.
- † About studying a narrative, first we have learned that we have to understand the historical and literary context of the narrative if we are to interpret it correctly. If we did not know what was going on in the time of the judges or we did not know what God had revealed and promised to these people earlier, then we could not possibly interpret Ruth correctly.
- Second, narratives are about tension, how the characters try to resolve it, and what results from their attempts. We have to use these narrative clues to evaluate the characters and discern the narrator's point.

- Third, there is limited space, so it is important to notice what the author includes and what he does not, what he emphasizes and what he does not.

- † **[Slide 29: narrative summary]** About the book of Ruth itself, we have learned first that the narrative occurs when the judges ruled Israel, in the time between when the people entered the land and when they got a king, and in a time when the people generally went through a cycle of disobedience, resulting discipline from God, repentance, and resulting blessing from God.
- Second, we learned there was a famine – a tension of lack of food – caused by God due to disobedience of the people, and instead of following God’s revealed procedure, Elimelech responded with human wisdom by going to Moab, which was forbidden by God. Thus Elimelech led his family astray spiritually, and astray by leaving the promised land to go seek sustenance in Moab. God killed Elimelech shortly thereafter.
 - Third, we learned that Elimelech’s sons remained in Moab but had a tension of lack of children. Instead of responding according to God’s revelation, they both used human wisdom to marry Moabite women, which was forbidden by God. They lived ten years without the blessing of children, and then God killed them too.
- † **[Slide 30: application]** Have we learned anything we can apply to our own lives? First, we have to realize that God has always wanted his people to show him devotion, dependence, and submissive obedience. He wants us to relate to him and to reflect his image. So we need to check whether our attitude and lifestyle show proper worship to God.
- † Second, we see that God is willing to discipline his people to bring them back to him. We live under a different covenant today, the New Covenant Jesus inaugurated with his blood to replace the Mosaic Covenant. We know that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, and thus God will not punish us for our mistakes. But sin still has repercussions, like a loss of intimacy with God, interpersonal problems, and distorted thinking. And we still might face God’s discipline, designed to correct our behavior and bring us back to walking with him. So we should try hard to stay in God’s light all the time.
- † Third, if we do sin or we do sense God’s discipline in our lives, we should repent! To repent means to turn around, to walk with God and trust in God instead of living in the flesh and trusting in our own desires and abilities.

Top Line Bottom Line

- † **[Slide 31: top line bottom line]** Now I want to teach you an analysis tool that is tremendously useful in both study and life. Even if you have been bored by everything up to now, you will want to learn this. I call this “top line / bottom line” and it has to do with the decision of whether to trust and walk with God by his revelation or to trust and walk in the flesh. Look at this chart with me. This concept was created by a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, Charles Baylis.
- Start at the left hand bottom, with yourself. Whether you want to attain a goal or be delivered from a trial, there are two paths you can take, just like in our narrative today. You can choose to continue walking in faith and obedience to God’s revelation and trust God to deliver you to the physical blessing you desire [that’s the top line]; or you can deviate from God’s way of life and seek to obtain the blessing by human rationale [the bottom line].
 - If you choose to use human rationale [the “bottom line”], there is a good chance that you will succeed and get at least something like the physical blessing you seek. However, the bottom line involves sin, overtly by doing something wrong or subtly by putting your desires ahead of God’s and trusting in yourself instead of in God. Because it involves sin, there might be negative side

effects, like God chastening you to bring you back in line, loss of intimacy with God, weaker faith, a weaker walk with God, and a weaker testimony to others for God.

- If you choose to walk in faith and obedience to God's revelation [the "top line"], you will be trusting God to deliver you to the physical blessing. The drawback to this method is that God might not give you what you want, he might change it in some way, or he might delay it. Doing things God's way makes physical success less certain, so you are in effect saying that you submit to his judgment about what is best for you, and – while you would like deliverance to the physical blessing – you are going to stick to God and his ways whether he grants your request or not.
- If you take the top line, you will get the physical blessings that God wants you to have. Even more importantly, you will definitely will experience spiritual blessings, such as growing stronger in faith, growing more spiritually mature so you can handle life and do God's work, and enjoying uninterrupted intimacy with God.

† One thing we saw in our narrative today is that our decision to live by the top line or the bottom line will have a big impact on which path our children choose.

† In the book of Ruth, there are two tensions, two physical blessings the characters want: food and children. Both times, they chose to resolve the problem with practical human wisdom, the bottom line.

- God chose to reveal this narrative in a way that makes the choice starkly clear: the bottom line clearly was sinful in the narrative, whether it was choosing to go to Moab or to marry Moabite women.
- And God chose to kill those people, to get our attention and make his point about this choice we need to make.
- The top line in the narrative is practically guaranteed success, because God promised fruitfulness of the womb and field if the people were obedient and trusting in him. In life the outcome is not always so certain.

† Let me give you another example. LeeAnn and I like to watch the show Blue Bloods. I like cop shows, and I like Blue Bloods. The main family is Roman Catholic, and while they are not super religious, they are supposed to be super ethical: every episode emphasizes ethics.

- But every show also hints at the philosophy that the end sometimes justifies the means, and a couple of weeks ago every cop in the family agreed that the end justifies the means for cops, that in order to put away bad guys, cops have to lie, cut corners on rights, and break the law, and it is both necessary and worthwhile to do bad things to obtain a good goal.
- This bothers me, because I believe this tool is how we discern whether a character is good or bad in the Bible and in life. I can tell you that the end does not justify the means in God's economy. God ultimately is in charge of the result, of the end, of giving or not giving the desired blessing. From the time of Adam and Eve in the garden to today, God consistently has asked us to trust him to bring the right blessing. What he asks of us is to choose the means, to choose the right path, to choose to walk by and trust in his revelation, instead of acting in the flesh with human wisdom.
- You will notice that we put in the bulletin both a devotion on Ruth and an insert on this top line bottom line tool. I promise you, if you read these over and reflect on how to apply this to your life, you will never make decisions the same again.

† **[Slide 32: blank]** Let's pray...