

**Bitterness or Blessing:  
Seeing the Hand of the Lord  
Ruth 1:1–14**

There is a tragic and historic boat story that you may be somewhat familiar with. Let me read to you a brief synopsis.

In 1871, tragedy struck Chicago as fire ravaged the city, killing 300 people and leaving 100,000 homeless. Horatio Gates Spafford was a lawyer in Chicago who had invested much of his money into the downtown Chicago real estate, and he had lost a great deal to the fire. He had a son (along with four daughters) that died of Scarlet Fever at about the same time as the fire.

Despite his great losses, for two years Spafford—who was a friend of evangelist Dwight L. Moody—assisted the homeless, impoverished, and grief-stricken who were ruined by the fire. After about two years of this work in Chicago, Spafford and his family decided to take a vacation. They were to go to England to join Moody and Ira Sankey on one of their evangelistic crusades, and then travel in Europe.

Horatio Spafford was delayed by some business at home, but sent his daughters and wife on ahead. He would catch up to them on the other side of the Atlantic. Their ship, the *Ville du Havre*, never made it. Off Newfoundland, it collided with an English sailing ship, called the *Loch Earn*, and sank within 20 minutes. Though Horatio's wife, Anna, was able to cling to a piece of floating wreckage (one of only 47 survivors among hundreds), their four daughters—Annie 10, Maggie 8, Bessie 5, and Tanetta 2—were killed.

Horatio received the shocking news through a telegram from his wife, with words merely saying: "Saved alone." Spafford boarded the next available ship to be near his grieving wife, and the two finally met up with Dwight Moody. "It is well," Spafford told him quietly. "The will of God be done." And it was God's strength that enabled Spafford to pen the words to one of the best-known hymns. Some say he wrote it on the ship to meet his wife, when they passed over the waters where his daughters drowned and died.

Listen to the first verse of Spafford's "It Is Well With My Soul."

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

The truths of these words resonate deep within the believer's heart because we each know that place of great loss and painful grief. And we know that there is no greater indication of peace that passes understanding and hope placed in our almighty God than to be able to sing these words. How is it that in such a season of great loss, he thought to sing praise to God? He has taught me to say, it is well with my soul.

My greatest concern and prayer for us all here today is that maybe we've experienced loss, hurt, or disappointment in some way and maybe we have been missing out on the abundant opportunities to point to the trustworthiness of God in our responses to these tough times.

This morning, we will see in Ruth 1:1–14, that because God is in complete control as the sovereign king of the universe, we must place our trust in Him alone. No matter what our circumstances, His hand is in it for our good and His glory.

### 1. Remaining in Moab (1:1–5)

This is the scene and setting of our passage, so just like any text of Scripture, let us do our very best to put our mind where and when the writer of the passage is. Try to picture everything that is going on as the narrator develops the opening words of this short story of Ruth.

#### a. Elimelech Sojourns in Moab with His Family (1–2)

**"In the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1)**—this is a period of outright lawlessness in the people and land of Israel. Looking at the prior verse (**Judges 21:25**) we are told, **"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."**

These judges did not just have legal authority among the people of Israel, but they were raised up by God to be the nation's deliverers in time of trouble (**Judges 2:16**). Sadly, we find that Israel was living with a "no limits" kind of immorality. They did what was "right in their own eyes," which is the equivalent of doing "evil in the sight of the Lord." They had no regard for the Law of God. Relativity ruled, not God.

In Israel at this time we witness the downward spiral of the nation of God. It was starkly and steadily characterized, first of all, by disobedience, and then judgment, repentance, and then deliverance, repeated over and over and over.

And to add to this condition of spiritual recession, "there was a famine in the land" (**Ruth 1:1**). Now Israel's famines could have come from many different natural causes (drought, disease, locust, invasions, warfare) but they were often believed to be tied to God's judgment (**Deuteronomy 28; Leviticus 26**).

Now the best connection I personally have with any sort of famine was our youth group's 30-hour famine that we did each year.

Culturally and historically, we must understand that the people of this day and age were highly dependant on the waters flowing and the crops/livestock growing to live. A famine in the land would surely provide a test for the hearts of the Israelites. Will they grumble and complain like before in the wilderness, or will they wait on the Lord for Him to so faithfully provide? Especially when the people of Israel are situated in Bethlehem.

**"Bethlehem in Judah" (Ruth 1:1)**—Bethlehem means, "House of bread," so the idea of a famine here would ring with irony. This would be like our 30-hour famine spent at Costco, and all the food was absolutely gone. So, like many of us rebellious and hungry students who didn't trust David Johnston and would have left for a Big Mac at Mickey D's, this certain man left.

**"sojourn in the country of Moab" (Ruth 1:1)**—Another word for a sojourner is a "resident alien". Using this word, it is clear that the man was planning on returning eventually.

Israel has a history with Moab. Only a couple of generations ago on Israel's way out of Egypt (during the Exodus) they came through Moab, but the Moabites did not meet the tired, exhausted, thirsty, hungry and chased Israelites with bread and water on the way (**Deuteronomy 23:4**). So this man is taking his family away from the famine in Bethlehem to Moab, a pagan and worldly country. Who is this guy anyway?

**“Elimelech” (Ruth 1:2)**—His name means “My God is King.” Those of you racking your brains about what good kid names there are, well, here's one. In such a dark period in Israel's history, during the judges where there was no king, and with the gloom of the famine, Elimelech should seem to stand as one bringing hope, right? Here comes Mr. “My God is King.” His values should be somewhat close to the Law of God.

**“Naomi” (Ruth 1:2)**—And the name Naomi, the wife of Mr. “My God is King,” means, “pleasant, lovely, or delightful,” a beautiful name for a wife.

**“Mahlon and Chilion” (v. 2)**—These are the names of Elimelech's sons, and they don't sound Hebrew hardly at all! This may be an indication that even with a strong Hebrew name like “Elimelech,” he may not believe in what his own name stands for. He is leaving Bethlehem and remaining in Moab; this isn't looking so good.

### **b. Naomi Suffers the Loss of Her Family (3–5)**

Have you ever been in a situation when things were just not going well, and then the kicker came? You find out some horrible news. Sometimes you may feel like, “One time is enough, but two, that is just over the top.”

**“left with” (Ruth 1:3)**—This is a familiar wording that we see in other Old Testament passages. It means, “left in life,” or “remained alive,” and often refers to the bereavement at the death of another.

For example, when the whole population of the earth was destroyed in the flood and Noah and his family “were left” (**Genesis 7:23**). Or in the Red Sea when God allowed the Israelites to escape through the tidal waves that were held back and not one was left of the Egyptians who pursued them (**Exodus 14:28**).

So Naomi is experiencing great loss for she is “left with” only her sons. And in **verse 4**, we find that Mahlon and Chilion take Orpah and Ruth as Moabite wives and they lived there about ten years. **Verse 5** comes as a shock upon just being shocked already, **“Mahlon and Chilion died.”**

**“left without her two sons and her husband” (Ruth 1:5)**—I couldn’t help but think of the words of the telegram Horatio received: “Saved alone.” They must have been feeling the same way to have just lost so much that was so precious to them.

We may not know exactly why God does what He does. We may not completely understand in this life. We may cry out to God, “Why! Why God!” But we do know that our flesh is feeble and frail. Life is a vapor, a mist, a breath, and a passing shadow. We should learn to live with the humble expectation that at some point we will be “left without” and feeling this deep sense of loss and grief. And because we are so susceptible to suffering our outer nature is wasting away. But Paul tells us, **“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17).**

We also know that God is sovereign. He is in control. Not one sparrow is forgotten by God. Not one hair is uncounted by God (**Luke 12**). He sustains us in every small and great circumstance of our lives as if He is just cradling us carefully in His mighty hands to bring about what He has decreed and seen as right.

Robert Hubbard Jr. says, “Stirred to tender sympathy and righteous outrage, the reader is now firmly in the author’s grasp. He [the reader] wants to know why these things happened.” Everything has been written to not just pose the question “Why?” but to point to the answer.

This is the tension of the beginning of Ruth and we have already seen the feeble frailty of humanity. Now, let us read on to see the mighty and gracious hand of the Lord provide.

## **2. Returning to Judah (1:6–22)**

The word “return” or “turn” is used 9 times in chapter **1:6–22** so it is fitting to call the rest of this chapter “their return.”

### **a. The LORD Visits to Provide for His People (6–7)**

**“the Lord had visited his people and given them food” (Ruth 1:6)**—God blesses His people by providing for them—this is a gracious act. He determined that it was the perfect timing to provide His people with food. He had not forgotten them; He had not rejected them. As Daniel Block says, “The ‘house of bread’ is being restocked.” The providential hand of God intervenes and comes to their aid.

**Psalm 121:1–4** says, **“I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? (2) My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. (3) He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. (4) Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”**

The plot begins to thicken in the story of Ruth as the dark and looming clouds break over God’s people.

### **b. Naomi Attempts to Protect Her Daughters-in-Law (8–18)**

#### **i. First Attempt (8–10)**

Somewhere down the road on their way back to Judah Naomi began to think that it would not be best for her daughters-in-law to come with her. She thought that their miseries would only be multiplied and that their hope of finding security in life would only be minimized, if not absolutely lost. So she is trying to protect them the best she knew how. And she honestly believed that if they would remain in Moab, then they’d have a better chance to remarry.

**“May the Lord deal kindly with you” (Ruth 1:8)**—It is important to note that she uses the God of Israel’s personal, covenant-keeping name, Yahweh; “the Lord,” even though her daughters-in-law are Moabite women. The Moabite god was named Chemosh, yet Naomi knew that the Lord, the God of Israel, was the only one true God. And it is from Him that faithfulness and loyal love comes. She expresses her appreciation to them and blesses them for loving her sons and her.

**“The Lord grant that you may find rest” (Ruth 1:9)**—Only the Lord can grant them rest (blessing or security).

When trials come our way, where do we turn? To whom do you run? If it is anywhere other than the presence of the Lord, you are drawing from an empty brook. This is real life, we have real problems, and there is no time to call upon false gods.

**“in the house of her husband!” (Ruth 1:9)**—Naomi prays that they would each find a husband, remarry and find stability to get on with their lives. Here we are introduced to a key theme in the story of Ruth: a widow finding a husband. Now the author has the reader looking forward to see if this is going to be possible in a seemingly impossible situation. And if this ever happens, it surely will be from the Lord, and He will receive credit.

This truly is a touching moment (**Ruth 1:9-10**) because they have been through so much together. I’m picturing the tears and prayers and hours of hurt that Mr. Spafford and his wife spent in England together.

## ii. Second Attempt (11–14)

In **verse 13**, her arguing with the two daughters-in-law turns into an accusation against God.

**“No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake” (Ruth 1:13)**—Naomi is lamenting here and her true feelings are finally exposed along the way back to Judah. She is exceedingly bitter with God for the situation they are in.

How many times have we tried to suppress feelings of hurt and not deal with them correctly? We just go on in life pretending that nothing is wrong. Naomi seemed to be handling everything very well—blessing her daughters-in-law before Yahweh, pleading they go back to Moab to find rest, reasoning with them about how much of a long shot it will be for them to have any hope of remarrying if they stayed with her. But her sin eventually surfaced. The condition of her heart could not be hidden. Has that happened to us, when it just took an argument to really draw out the greater issue in our heart?

**Hebrews 12:15** says, “**See to it that... no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.**” Bitterness among the body of Christ is a wicked, wicked sign. It is the sign of unresolved matters. It is a sign of problems not addressed with the solutions that God has provided.

**“the hand of the Lord has gone out against me” (Ruth 1:13)**—The “hand of Yahweh” is an anthropomorphism (using a human trait to describe the divine) and generally it refers to the activity of the Lord. It’s a great way to illustrate how an invisible God sustains all life on earth.

In **Exodus 9:3**, this phrase is used, but it is in reference to the Lord bringing a severe plague on the Egyptians. And **Deuteronomy 2:15** says, “**For indeed the hand of the Lord was against them, to destroy them from the camp, until they had perished.**”

So, in a general sense, “the hand of the Lord” is used of the activity of the Lord, but when used in the way Ruth is using it, it refers to the Lord punishing His opponents or destroying His enemies. Naomi was saying that Yahweh is her enemy! She points the blame at Him! She felt as if God was just pressing down from heaven against her dying without hope on earth. She was not capable of singing, “It is well with my soul.” On the contrary, she was feeling embittered in her soul. Doesn’t make for a good song...unless it’s country.

You guys, there are two ways to handle hardship. Two! You either blame God or you bless Him! We must get this straight.

How can you blame a blameless God? How can a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? How can the creation question the Creator? How can what is molded say to the molder, “Why?” Who are you to answer back to God? How can you say to the Giver of life that He has no right to take it?

**Psalm 111:7** says, “**The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.**” Do your responses to hard times reflect the trustworthiness of God?

**“but Ruth clung to her” (Ruth 1:14)**—This is the glimpse of hope in the reader’s eye. This is the ray of light that has shone through with the parting



of the dark clouds. Although Naomi has no clue what the Lord is up to, He is supplying her with exactly what and whom she needed. The next time we are in Ruth we will be going through Ruth's radical conversion to the ways of the Lord and her steadfast devotion to Naomi in Bethlehem.

The ticket to bitterness is dealing with life's problems on our own, and not according to God's solutions which are found in His Word.

If we fail to trust in God, then we will see the "hand of the Lord" as going out against us, and not visiting us to provide for us.

Because life is full of insecurity and instability, the only hope we have from God is based on the personal relationship we have with Him.

Listen to **Hebrews 6:18b–20**. **“So that...we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf.”**

**May we see the mighty and gracious hand of the Lord in our life and bless Him no matter how hard life gets.**