



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Your Story Isn't Over

Ruth 1:7–18

Tim Badal | May 14, 2023



Let's turn our attention to the subject of moms and women by looking at the book of Ruth this morning. Ruth is a four-chapter book that Bible scholars say this is the most feminine of all the books in the Bible. One of the reasons is it tells a story about women. All the conversations involve women. It's also a book about love, redemption and how God has a plan and purpose, even when life seems dark. That's what I want to focus on this morning. There are a lot of things we could talk about on Mother's Day. Some subjects would be joyful or exciting. But I want to address something different. I want to consider the messes in life. We're going to see some messes in the lives of three women in Ruth 1. Let's face it. Moms, you're really good at taking care of messes.

Growing up in a family of three boys, my mom took care of a lot of our messes; the physical messes, yes, but also the relational ones—school messes and the different dynamics that took place. We would bring Mom a lot of our troubles and she would readily take care of them. But what happens when the women in our lives have messes in their lives? Where are they to turn? We're going to learn today that these three women had some pretty messed-up lives. Circumstances and situations had caused them to lose their hope and peace. We'll find in this text an example of where to turn when life seems pretty messy.

Maybe Mother's Day isn't a very happy day for you. Maybe you're scrolling through social media, seeing wonderful pictures of people with their moms, seeing admiration for moms. Maybe today your life just isn't there. What's the answer for you? I believe there's a lesson here for those who live messed up lives and how to faithfully to the Lord.

As we'll see today, God takes the messes of our lives and changes them into miracles. God turns the messes in our lives into something we would never have thought possible. But we have to respond in a proper way to receive many of those blessings. So let's look at Ruth 1 and see how their lives start out pretty well, but then get pretty bad for these women.

¹ In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 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. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should

bear sons,¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.”¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”¹⁶ But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.”¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?”²⁰ She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.²¹ I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

²² So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Three women, three distinct lives, three distinct personalities, yet one terrible situation. We’re going to be introduced to three women who lose their husbands. We’re going to see three different responses when life is messed up and how we can see God working miracles amidst this.

So let’s introduce ourselves to each of these women. I want you to be thinking about how you respond to the messes of life. Do you think your life is over? Or do you know, because of God, that your story isn’t over, that God has a plan and purpose even for the most difficult of trials?

Struggling with defeat—Naomi

Enter stage: Naomi. Here we find a woman who is struggling with defeat. While we don’t have much information about these ladies, we do know this about Naomi: she’s an Israelite woman who lives in Bethlehem. We know she’s married to a man named Elimelech and they have two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Life seemed to be going pretty well, that is until a famine came to Bethlehem. Because they were unable to raise crops or find provisions, Elimelech decided to do something the Bible told God’s people not to do. God says, “I will take care of My people in the Promised Land. You stay there.”

Elimelech was not the only person who made the decision to leave, but he’s the one we have a record of. He took his wife and their two sons, and they headed to Moab, a neighboring country that didn’t have a famine. The problem is Moab was a pagan nation that worshiped pagan gods. This was against what God desired for His people. But because of his circumstances, Elimelech made the human decision to take his family to Moab, against the wisdom of God, because that’s where provisions could be found. We’re told they were there ten years which was a long time. During that time, tragedy struck.

First, Elimelech dies. We aren’t told how or why or when. Then we’re told in short order that her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, the husbands of two Moabite women, also die. Again, we’re not given the timing or the reasons. That leaves these three ladies standing alone. They’re widows and they have no children, leaving them with the prospect of a very hard life. The protection and provision their husbands had provided is now gone. They are on their own.

Maybe this Mother’s Day, you’ve had a similar experience. Life was going really well, then all of a sudden, because of a situation or trial, life looks very different. Your provision and protection are gone. What are you to do? Where are you to turn? What hope do you have?

In Naomi we see a picture of defeat and need to realize she has a good reason for this. Her loss is the greatest. She lost her husband, which no doubt left a huge void. To lose your spouse after many years totally alters your life. But then to lose her two sons as well. It’s one thing to lose a spouse, but to have to bury your children is totally unnatural and out of order. Naomi lost the three people she loved the most and to whom she was closest.

Before we get into how she lived out her defeat, let’s give her some props. She has two things she’s doing really well. Even in the middle of her struggle, the reason why she’s going to leave Moab is because she has heard *“the Lord has visited his people and*

given them food" (1:6). What a great reminder that even in our difficulties, we should keep our eyes open and our ears tuned to what God is doing. She had enough faith to hear that God was still on the move and had the desire to go back to that. She should be commended that she had that kind of faith even after all her losses.

Second, and this is so important today, we need to see that she had a phenomenal relationship with her daughters-in-law. We see a number of depictions of their love for each other. The two women kiss their mother-in-law. They hug her. They weep with her. She deals tenderly with them. They deal tenderly with her. It's a reminder that as difficult as in-law relationships can be, Naomi is an incredible example of what we are called to as well.

Now, I want you to notice a couple things. Her daughters-in-law came from a different country, a different language, a different set of customs. There was a lot involved in the relationship between daughters-in-law and mother-in-law. Yet Naomi found a way to draw them close to her, not to push them away. Before all their tragedy, she had a great relationship with them.

Amanda and I are coming to the time when our boys will start introducing us to girls. We have a choice to make. Let's just be honest, as parents the first response usually is to think, "Nobody's good enough for our kids." In my case my parents were thinking, "If anybody will just take him...." They loved Amanda and were thinking, "God bless you for taking on that project? You're a saint."

Many of us wonder who will be good enough for our kids. We create challenges for those whom our children bring into our lives. We set up unrealistic expectations. But there is none of that here. Naomi has received these women, even from a different culture, and has created an environment in which it was easy for these in-law daughters to connect with their mother-in-law.

Here are some wonderful and practical questions for us to ask:

- As our families expand, how are we doing at welcoming those who come in because our children have invited them in through marriage?
- Are we pushing them away?
- Are putting challenges and hurdles in front of them? .
- Are we speaking ill against them?
- Or as Naomi did, are we drawing them to ourselves, so they will love us and we will in fact love them?

What a great biblical reminder of the relationship in-laws need to have, and the love and respect that should be there.

Now, let's deal with Naomi's struggles. Naomi is utterly defeated. She is discouraged; some would even say she's depressed. She has a good reason for this: she's lost three of her loved ones. I want you to notice how complete her defeat is. This isn't just that she was kind of down about it. She has defined herself in her defeat.

First of all, she's defined her relationship with God in this place of defeat. Three different times in our text she will talk about how the Lord is against her, how God in many ways (in the original language) "hates" her. It's as if He longs for her to suffer or even seeks to bring her harm.

For some this morning, you're sitting here in your mess, thinking, "Even God doesn't love me. Even God is against me. Even God seeks to take away any peace or joy I have." Naomi believes that God doesn't want her to succeed or be happy, but that He longs for her to be hopeless. Maybe someone here finds yourself feeling that way toward God as well.

Naomi gets to the place where she believes God is against her and that her life is hopeless. But notice the natural human response toward the women she loves and who love her: she tries to push them away. Three times in our text you'll see her pushing those closest to her away from her. "Go away from me. Go home to your mothers. Go home to your way of life instead of staying with me." Our natural response, when life is so messed up and we've given up hope, is to isolate ourselves instead of letting in the answer to our need.

Naomi is double-minded because she says, "God hates me. God is against me and is treating me harshly." But then notice when she says good-bye to her daughters-in-law in verses eight and nine, she says, *"Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!"* So she's saying, "God is against me, but I'm going to ask Him to bless you." This is personal belief and public proclamation that don't add up. Some of you, when you're alone, say to yourself, "God hates me and is against me." But then you

come to church, or you're around God's people, and you'll say, "The Lord bless you. Isn't the Lord good? I pray He'll be good to you."

There's double-mindedness in Naomi because she's hurting. She's wrestling with the question, "How can God be so against me, yet be good to others?" So she pushes away her daughters-in-law, saying, "Let me be by myself." This situation has made her bitter, not better. For some this morning, the messes that have come into your life have caused you to be bitter instead of better.

Stepping toward a departure—Orpah

We've looked at the defeated one—Naomi. Now we have to ask how we would respond. It's as if God puts us in this scenario and we could either respond like Orpah or Ruth. Now the tables turn to Orpah, and we see her stepping toward departing.

We know even less about Orpah than we do about Naomi. All we know is she's a Moabite and the wife of either Mahlon or Chilion, Naomi's sons. We know she's experienced loss. We know she's been told about God's goodness in Bethlehem. But it seems as if Orpah's response is similar to that of Naomi's husband Elimelech. Remember, Elimelech left Bethlehem to go to Moab against the wisdom of God he knew, because he chose to humanly deal with a problem. He took into his own hands the care of his life, so he made an unwise decision. It seems as if Orpah, according to the prodding of Naomi, is going to return to that which is familiar. She's returning to her people and her god. The phrase "her people" literally refers to her family, her clan. She's going home to try a 'do-over.' She's going to her dad, so he can find her a new husband and get a new lease on life. The idea here is the self-reliant pursuit of a fresh start. "I'm going to take my life into my own hands. After all, what has my mother-in-law's faith gotten her? I'll fix this myself."

In our messes, many of us stop relying on God and start taking our messes into our own two hands. We try to address them and fix them our way. Not only is Orpah going back to her family, she's also going back to her "gods," the text tells us. She had known Jehovah God, the God of the Israelites. She had heard of Him moving. But instead of pursuing Him, she goes back to her former way of life and the worship of the many gods of Moab, perhaps even to the sin and debauchery for which Moab was known during that time. Then we hear nothing more of her. She hugs and kisses her mother-in-law, then leaves (1:14). The Bible says nothing more of Orpah, but the Jewish rabbis have much to say about Orpah.

In the Talmud and Midrash, which were commentaries on these texts and the educational system of the time, this is what the Jewish religious leaders said about Orpah. She went back to Moab had had numerous children. Her last child possibly was the most famous of them all. None of these children came through the love of a husband, but according to the rabbinical writings Orpah gave herself to a life of debauchery and sin. In a single night, she gave herself to a great many men. At some point she conceived a son whom many scholars believe would become one of the most famous non-Israelites in the Old Testament. Her youngest son, according to this tradition, was Goliath who stood against the people of God. This Jewish history helps us understand a little better about how Goliath could speak so familiarly to the people of Israel. What would have caused David to be so angry and so filled with the desire to avenge God's name? It seems that Goliath was his cousin; that there was a family connection. You surely would be all the more angry if one of your own cousins was speaking against your God and your people.

Now, the Bible doesn't say anything about this, so we're speculating here. But I want you to know that from the Scriptures we do know that Orpah made a decision to leave God and try to fix life on her own. We don't have to go any further. We don't have to go to rabbinical writing to see that. I don't want to demonize her, if she isn't to be demonized.

Are some of us here in our mess ready to leave the God we once knew? Are we so lost in our hopelessness and helplessness that we would turn away from God and go to our old way of living? The writer seems to be saying that's not the right decision.

Serious about her devotion—Ruth

The rest of this chapter highlights the third woman in this story—Ruth. In her, we see a person who is serious about her devotion. As Orpah is leaving, notice what Ruth is doing in verse 14: *"Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her."*

Do you see the comparison? While Orpah is taking one path, Ruth takes another. This word “clung” means literally to stick like glue. It’s the same word we see in Genesis 2:24, *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast [cling] to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”*

So while both daughters-in-law loved Naomi, both had the same information about Jehovah God, both had the same experience of trouble, one walks away and the other one clings. She clings to Naomi, but as we’ll see, even more she clings to the God Naomi believed in.

Why does Ruth respond like she did? Many commentators tell us that Ruth may have a devout walk with the Lord. She has come to recognize that the gods of Moab do not reign supreme and the ways of life in Moab are viewed by God as debauchery. So she decides, “I am going to follow God. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. I want to go where God is.”

This brings us to three questions to ask ourselves as we think about how serious we are about our devotion through the messes of life.

1. Who am I following?

Ruth follows God. She commits herself to a known God even in her unknown circumstances. There’s nothing that tells her what her future is going to be like. She has no idea what tomorrow will bring. She says, “It doesn’t matter. I will follow God.” Women of Village Bible Church, will you be resolute in this? Can you dedicate yourself to this? “I will follow God, because He holds my future; I’m going to trust Him.”

2. What level of faith do I possess?

Once you make the decision to follow God, then the questions come. To what extent will you follow Him? Will you pursue Him only when things are good? Will you pursue Him only when God gives you good things? Will you pursue Him only when you’re promised success? Will you follow no matter what comes?

Two individuals in the Bible leave their land because God calls them to another place. The first is Abraham in the book of Genesis. Abraham is called by God to leave his pagan homeland and go to a new land where God says He dwells. For God to get Abraham from his pagan land to where God is, God promises Abraham that He will prosper and bless him, that He will make him great. Yet even then Abraham has difficulty leaving his homeland and following the plans of God.

What we see here in Ruth is a young woman from a pagan land who has a greater level of faith than Abraham did. She follows God with no promises, no caveats, no disclaimers, no guarantee of prosperity on the horizon. She says, “I’m going to go for one reason: because He is my God.”

Are you following God because you believe God is going to prosper you? Are you following God because you believe God is going to make your life comfortable? Or are you, like Ruth, following God because you believe He has the answer?

3. How firm is my devotion to God and His people?

Notice what Ruth says in verses 16-17:

“For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.” Then she brings God back in and says, “May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

This word “determined” is an important Hebrew word. It literally means resolute, devoted. It means she stiffened up and was firm. She had made up her mind. This is where I want to close with a final thought for our ladies here today.

Over the last year I’ve had numerous conversations with ladies in the church and this is what I’ve learned. There’s worry, fear and anxiety about the what ifs, and there are a lot of what ifs to worry about. Women, especially moms, have a lot to worry about. You worry about your family. You worry about how to take care of your kids. You worry whether they’ll succeed or fall into trouble. The anxiety and distress comes from the phrase, “What if?” What if my kids do this? What happens if this happens to them? What am I going to do when this takes place? The Bible tells us we are not to focus on the what if questions.

Notice how Ruth is not thinking about the what ifs. She doesn't live in a place of what if that leads to anxiety, worry and despair. Rather, she moves to a different place. And I pray that our women—and men as well—will be able to do this regarding our parenting, circumstances, troubles and the messes of life. I pray that we will move from “What if...?” to “Even if...”

Ruth says, “I’m going to go to my God and to my new people. **Even if** things don’t work out, I’m with God. **Even if** I don’t get a new husband, I’m following God. **Even if** I never have children, I’m going to follow God. **Even if** I live a life of poverty, I’m going to follow God.”

Notice the change from the what ifs to the even ifs. Job said this as well: “Even if You slay me, I’m still going to worship You. I’m still going to follow You.” Do you want to know what will slay your anxiety and concern about tomorrow? Change your what ifs into even ifs.

“God, I’m with You. I’m clinging to You. I’m holding fast to You. Wherever You tell me to go, I’ll go. Whatever You ask me to do, I’ll do, because I am devoted, I am dedicated, I am determined to follow You, no matter what may come.” We sang about that earlier, “Come what may.” Trials and tribulations come. It doesn’t matter.

While I may not know the troubles that are ahead of me, what I do know is that I am with a God Who will take care of me. I am with a God Who will love me. I’m with a God Who will provide for me. Not what if, but even if those troubles come. Even if my life falls apart, I know one thing to be true: I have a God Who loves and cares for me, so nothing will separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:31-39).

So what mess are you dealing with today? Will you allow it to keep you defeated? Will you allow it to question all you know about God and to walk away from Him? Or will it create in you the needed fortitude to step out in faith, to believe and trust in God?

Ruth’s story didn’t end there. For three more chapters, we see the provision, protection and plenty God brings into Ruth’s life. We will learn even in the opening verses of the New Testament that Ruth’s life wasn’t over even after she breathed her last. In the genealogy of Jesus Christ our Lord, we see her come back. She became the ancestor, first of all of King David. Talk about an awesome opportunity. God saw fit to take this pagan woman and made her the ancestor of the greatest king over all Israel. Even greater than that, God took the mess of Moab and turned it into a miracle. Keep reading on in the genealogy and you’ll see the King of kings and the Lord of lords is a descendent of Ruth herself. Jesus Christ entered into her bloodline, her family tree.

Women, no matter the messes of life today, your story isn’t over. Devote yourself to the prospect that God has this; even if everything goes bad, God has a plan. You and your descendants will see that God is a faithful God, Who visits His faithfulness on a thousand generations.

So here we are, thousands of years later, and we are celebrating the faithful determination of a woman who had a pretty messed up life, but who dedicated herself, in the midst of a mess, to believing in a miraculous God. My prayer this morning is that all of us would do the same. It’s my encouragement to all the mothers out there, to cling to your God, to cling to your Savior, even when the messes of life come, because God is the One Who can do miracles. Amen?