



Session

12

FAITH THROUGH TRIALS

God can use life's tragedies to bring about His purposes.

RUTH 1:6-18

⁶ She and her daughters-in-law prepared to leave the land of Moab, because she had heard in Moab that the LORD had paid attention to His people's need by providing them food. ⁷ She left the place where she had been living, accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, and traveled along the road leading back to the land of Judah. ⁸ She said to them, "Each of you go back to your mother's home. May the LORD show faithful love to you as you have shown to the dead and to me. ⁹ May the LORD enable each of you to find security in the house of your new husband." She kissed them, and they wept loudly. ¹⁰ "No," they said to her. "We will go with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi



replied, “Return home, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands?”¹² Return home, my daughters. Go on, for I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me to have a husband tonight and to bear sons,¹³ would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me.”¹⁴ Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.¹⁵ Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god. Follow your sister-in-law.”¹⁶ But Ruth replied: Do not persuade me to leave you or go back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yahweh punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.¹⁸ When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped trying to persuade her.

Highlight the counsel given by Naomi to her daughters-in-law. Pay particular attention to any clues about Naomi’s emotional state at the time. Circle key words in Ruth’s commitment statement. What do these key words reveal about her values and beliefs?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Life is filled with tragedies. People receive bad news from their doctors. A midnight call brings unwelcome news of loved ones killed in auto accidents. A woman cries bitterly before her parents because her marriage has failed. A husband comes home dejected because he has lost his job. Children lay in cancer treatment medical centers across the country. Nightly news announces another disaster with multiple fatalities. Tragedies abound.

Many people believe life is only supposed to be filled with joy, success, happiness, and unencumbered progress. Tragedy knocks them off their feet. They often become depressed, disillusioned, and despondent. God can use the greatest tragedies of life to bring them to a much deeper level of dependency on Him.

What events in life cause the greatest distress or desperation? How do these things move us forward in our spiritual growth?

In this week's session we are studying the triple tragedy experienced by Naomi in losing her husband and both of her sons. To make matters worse, she lost them on foreign soil away from Bethlehem, her hometown. She had fled to Moab with her husband and two sons to escape a ravenous famine. The promise of a better life became a nightmare of grief as Naomi became a widow and the mother-in-law of two widows. Yet, in the midst of this horrible devastation, God used the tragedies of Naomi's life to bring about His purposes.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

RUTH 1:1-22

The story of Ruth is set “during the time of the judges” (Ruth 1:1). The faith displayed in the Book of Ruth contrasts sharply with the accounts of faithlessness in the Book of Judges. The events in Ruth are precipitated by “a famine in the land” (v. 1). While famine may be challenging for most Americans to understand, the Hebrews knew famine all too well. There was famine during the days of Abraham (Gen. 12:10), Joseph (Gen. 41:54-57), David (2 Sam. 21:1), Elijah (1 Kings 18:2), Elisha (2 Kings 4:38), Haggai (Hag. 1:10-11), and Nehemiah (Neh. 5:3).

We are not told the cause of the famine during the time of Ruth. Drought was the most common cause of famines in the Old Testament, but famines sometimes were attributed to God's judgment. In Deuteronomy 28, the curses for disobedience to the covenant included famine. If God's people went after other gods, He would send enemies to destroy their crops and occupy their land. This happened



during the time of the judges, as we saw in session 10. Midianite armies trampled Judah's wheat fields like a swarm of locusts (Judg. 6:5), leaving devastation behind them.

To escape the effects of famine, an Israelite named Elimelech [ih LIM uh lek] moved with his wife, Naomi, and two sons from Bethlehem in Judah to the land of Moab (Ruth 1:1). Though the Moabites were perennial enemies of Judah, Elimelech was forced to move his family there in search of food.

After a short time, Elimelech died (v. 3). His two sons then married Moabite women (Ruth and Orpah). Ten years later the sons died as well (vv. 4-5). Naomi was left in a foreign land without the support of a husband or sons. Deciding to return to Judah, she instructed her daughters-in-law to return to their families in Moab. Ruth insisted on going with Naomi. Together, Naomi and Ruth returned to Naomi's home in Bethlehem.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

A DESPERATE RETURN (RUTH 1:6-10)

VERSES 6-7

⁶ She and her daughters-in-law prepared to leave the land of Moab, because she had heard in Moab that the LORD had paid attention to His people's need by providing them food. ⁷ She left the place where she had been living, accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, and traveled along the road leading back to the land of Judah.

Leaving Moab must have been a difficult decision for Naomi. Having lived in Moab for over 10 years, she had some comfort and security there. The travel home would be difficult—a 7- to 10-day journey of approximately 50 or 60 miles. She would have to cross the Jordan River and climb approximately 2,000 feet in elevation. Added to the arduous journey was the fact that she would be traveling alone or with two other women—neither possibility was prudent in the Old Testament world.

No doubt, Naomi would have been encouraged by hearing news of the relief from the famine back home. She might not thrive in Bethlehem, but at least she would not starve. That ***the LORD had paid attention to His people's needs by providing them food*** suggested divine approval and blessings once more. Naomi must have found

strength in that. Still grieving, Naomi left Moab *accompanied by her two daughters-in-law* and began her journey *back to the land of Judah*.

VERSES 8-10

⁸ She said to them, “Each of you go back to your mother’s home. May the LORD show faithful love to you as you have shown to the dead and to me. ⁹ May the LORD enable each of you to find security in the house of your new husband.” She kissed them, and they wept loudly. ¹⁰ “No,” they said to her. “We will go with you to your people.”

Naomi attempted to persuade Ruth and Orpah not to go to Bethlehem with her. The phrase *go back* translates two imperatives in Hebrew. Naomi commanded her daughters-in-law, literally, “to walk, return” to their mothers’ homes. She offered them her blessing with *may the LORD show faithful love to you*. The Hebrew word translated *faithful love* is the word for God’s covenant loyalty (*chesed*). Naomi was asking the Lord to treat Ruth and Orpah as members of the covenant, though both were Moabites. The fact that the Lord would bestow His faithful love on the non-Hebrew women should not be lost on modern readers. God loves all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, social standing, or gender.

The Old Testament world offered little to no support for widows. (By contrast, the Old Testament records numerous passages of God’s concern and care for widows; see Deut. 14:28-29; 27:19; Pss. 68:5; 146:9.) Naomi knew it was in Ruth and Orpah’s best interest to return to their homeland and remarry. Thus, she offered an additional blessing to encourage them to *find security in the house of a new husband*. With her two-part blessing, Naomi was releasing her daughters-in-law from any sense of further obligation. She was willing to put their best interests above her personal preferences.

One cannot miss the love that Naomi had for Ruth and Orpah as *she kissed them, and they wept loudly*. She had lost her husband and her two sons. Now she was willing to give up her two daughters-in-law.

Ruth and Orpah’s reply and determination may have surprised Naomi. Both daughters-in-law repeated their desire to return with Naomi. They insisted: *“We will go with you to your people.”* It is a testimony to Naomi’s good character that the women did not want to leave her.



Should a believer be ashamed for feeling desperate or distraught? Explain.

A BITTER PLEA (RUTH 1:11-14)

VERSE 11

¹¹ But Naomi replied, “Return home, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands?”

Again, Naomi insisted the women return to their homeland. The word *return* translates an imperative in the original Hebrew. Naomi’s two questions—***Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands?***—reflect the cultural expectations of a levirate marriage. Deuteronomy 25:5 established this ancient principle: “When brothers live on the same property and one of them dies without a son, the wife of the dead man may not marry a stranger outside the family. Her brother-in-law is to take her as his wife.” Levirate marriage served at least three purposes. First, it provided for the widow. Levirate marriage offered widows some sense of security. Second, levirate marriage preserved the family estate. Finally, levirate marriage preserved the family name, an important concept in the Old Testament. Levirate marriage unambiguously communicates God’s concern for widows.

When Naomi’s sons, Mahlon [MA lahn] and Chilion [KIL ih ahn], died, the levirate marriage law meant that the widows Ruth and Orpah could not look outside Naomi’s family for new husbands as long as they were attached to Naomi. They could marry only close relatives of Naomi who could stand in the place of Elimelech’s deceased sons. Naomi was releasing them from this obligation.

VERSES 12-13

¹² Return home, my daughters. Go on, for I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me to have a husband tonight and to bear sons, ¹³ would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me.”

For the third time, Naomi told her daughters-in-law to **return home**. The concept of levirate marriage can be seen again in Naomi's reference to the hypothetical situation of her giving birth to more sons to marry Ruth and Orpah. Even if she remarried that very night and conceived a child, Naomi asked Ruth and Orpah: **would you be willing to wait for them to grow up?** Naomi answered her own question with a **no**.

Naomi wanted a better life for Ruth and Orpah, insisting her own life was **much too bitter ... to share**. She knew Ruth and Orpah's prospects for finding new husbands were far better if they returned to their fathers. Then they could marry anyone acceptable to their families and to themselves. Naomi was forcing them to see the harsh truth that their future was bleak if they remained with her. Holding on to them would have been an act of selfishness on Naomi's part—in her best interest, but not theirs. So she did the painful, unselfish, and compassionate thing: she told them to return home.

VERSE 14

¹⁴ Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Again we read of the women weeping together. •**Orpah kissed her mother-in-law**, evidently as a gesture of farewell. It is easy for us to consider Ruth the “good” daughter-in-law and Orpah as the “bad” one. In reality, Orpah didn't do anything wrong. She too loved Naomi, wept over her, and kissed her when they parted company. Rather than seeing Orpah as bad, we should see Ruth as extraordinarily loyal and loving.

Ruth clung to Naomi. The Hebrew word translated **clung** can be translated as “bonded.” Ruth had bonded with Naomi to the point that she refused to leave. The Book of Genesis uses the same word to describe the intimacy of the marriage relationship in that “a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife” (2:24).

What steps could we take toward trusting God if life turns bitter for us?

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Family*

God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. It is composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood, or adoption.

A LIFELONG PROMISE (RUTH 1:15-18)

VERSES 15-18

¹⁵ Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god. Follow your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶ But Ruth replied: Do not persuade me to leave you or go back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yahweh punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. ¹⁸ When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped trying to persuade her.

For the fourth time (vv. 8,11,12), Naomi pleaded with Ruth to stay in Moab. The word **follow** translates a command in Hebrew and indicates Naomi’s determination to convince Ruth to stay.

Ruth replied, **Do not persuade me to leave you.** The Hebrew word translated *persuade* indicates that Naomi had begged Ruth to return to her native land. The verb translated *leave* can also be rendered “forsake” and “abandon.” Did Ruth consider leaving Naomi to be abandonment?

Ruth gave reasons why it was pointless for Naomi to keep trying to persuade her to leave. In her words we find an example of what it means to love. Love means commitment. Ruth made a lifelong promise to Naomi, insisting she would follow Naomi and live wherever Naomi lived. Remember that Ruth was a Moabite, unlike Naomi the Hebrew. Nevertheless, Ruth vowed that Naomi’s people would become her people. Not only did Ruth commit herself to Naomi in life, she committed herself to Naomi in death: **Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.** The relationship between the two of them could come to an end by one means only—death.

Ruth also declared her allegiance to Naomi’s God: **your God will be my God.** In verse 17, Ruth used the personal name of God—**Yahweh.** Ruth would worship the one true God—the One who created and sustains the universe and who set the Israelites free from the bonds of Egyptian slavery.

Ruth was willing to set aside her Moabite identity to join herself to Naomi. Following Naomi and the Lord would involve a renunciation of her past life. In declaring her commitment to Naomi and to the

Lord God, she was willing to give up everything.

Naomi resigned herself to the fact that she could not change Ruth's mind, so she stopped trying to persuade her. Literally, it says that Naomi "stopped talking to her."

Both Naomi and Ruth exemplified a living and vibrant faith, developed through trials. Ruth's declaration of allegiance to Naomi reminds us that faith involves more than just a point of decision; it is a changed way of living that begins with a point of decision.

What does a person's response to life's difficulties reveal about what he or she values? How do the difficulties of life sharpen our faith in God?

BIBLE SKILL: *Create a compare/contrast chart to study a passage.*

On one side of a vertical line, identify words and phrases that describe Ruth's pledge to Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17). On the other side, note words and phrases that describe Peter's pledge to Jesus on the night of his betrayal (Matt. 26:33-34,74-75; Mark 14:29-30,68-72; Luke 22:33-34,60-61; John 13:37-38; 18:27). How are the pledges similar? How do these pledges compare to your pledge to follow Christ?

RUTH'S PLEDGE TO NAOMI

PETER'S PLEDGE TO JESUS

IN MY CONTEXT

- God's plans sometimes involve enduring trials and having to make difficult decisions.
- During times of trials, believers can find comfort and support



through people God has placed in their lives.

- Believers can remain confident that God is worthy of our trust even when we are facing difficulties in life.

Reflect on trials and difficulties you have faced in your life. What did you learn about yourself and God? How have you built on these lessons learned? With whom do you need to share these lessons?

How can your Bible study group interact with those experiencing trials to let them know of your love, concern, and support? Share ideas with each other.

Define a trial or difficulty you are presently facing. What actions can you take that will demonstrate faith in Jesus? Ask God to strengthen your faith in Him through this experience.

MEMORY VERSE

But Ruth replied: Do not persuade me to leave you or go back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.
—Ruth 1:16