

## **Callings: Ruth – Finding A Way When There’s No Way Ruth 1:1-18**

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August 3, 2025

Summer seems to be a popular time for family reunions. How many of you have had or will have a family reunion some time in these summer months? For many it’s an opportunity to bring all the generations of the family together - aunts, uncles, cousins (first, second, and second once removed), grandparents, grandkids, and so on - for a good meal, maybe some games, and, of course, a lot of storytelling! What are the stories that get told over and over again in your family? Nearly every family has them. You know the one about how great uncle Lloyd chased away the skunk in the backyard but paid the price for it. Or about little Susie chomping down on a turtle. Some make us laugh, others tell of someone’s bravery or sacrifice, still others remind us of the good deeds of relatives long since passed away.

Stories are how we keep our family memories alive. Of course, they serve other purposes, too. They knit us together over distance and time. They help us to form and hold onto our identity as a family. They teach each new generation the values we have and the behaviors we celebrate. For thousands of years, stories were only passed down orally. The Hebrew people, our ancient relatives in our family of faith, told their stories from one generation to the next - stories of how God created the world, how they came to have a promised land, and of how God worked through individual people, often those you would least expect, to advance God’s purposes in the world. Over the last few weeks, we have been looking at the stories of different characters in the Bible and the callings God put on their lives. They are ordinary people like you and me who God uses to do extraordinary things. In the gritty story of her relationship with Naomi, Ruth is a great example. Hers is a story of loyalty, compassion, determination, and, above all, hope. Hope that still resonates with us today. So, sit back, friends, and let me tell you a story.

Old Testament professor Cameron B.R. Howard writes to pastors who preach about Ruth, “To proclaim the remarkable hope in this story, a preacher must first reckon with the significant despair that frames the narrative.” That despair begins with a famine in Judah, one so severe that Naomi, her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons leave their home in Bethlehem to live in Moab where food is more plentiful. Ironically, the name Bethlehem means “house of bread”. Yet, for this little family, no bread is to be found. Their decision to go to Moab, though, is an interesting one because in other parts of the Old Testament, we read that the people of Judah loathed the Moabites.

Fortunately, Naomi and Elimelech and their two sons seem to have built a good life in Moab until, sadly, Elimelech dies, and Naomi is left husbandless. Nonetheless, she still has her sons who eventually marry Moabite wives and together take care of her. But then, both sons die, as well.

I think it’s hard for us to understand how precarious Naomi’s position is at this point. According to custom of the time, if a woman’s husband dies, his brothers are expected to marry her and care for her. But, apparently, Elimelech didn’t have any brothers. In addition, she is too old to give another man children - making her an unlikely candidate for marriage at all. In Moab, without a male relative to take her in, she has no network of support, no home, no access to food,

no hope. The best she can do is to return to Judah, where the famine has ended, and try to scrape together enough to survive.

Naomi also realizes that she is too old to give birth to additional sons who might marry Orpah and Ruth. The younger women are in the same position as she is except there is still the possibility that some man from another family might marry one of them. So, she encourages her daughters-in-law to go back to their families in Moab where they will have safe places to stay and the possibility of starting over.

Orpah returns to her family, but Ruth decides to stay with Naomi, despite how tenuous their future looks. Ruth makes this impassioned promise of loyalty 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, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” And with these words, Naomi can finally have hope. Ruth is prepared to make a way out of no way despite a number of risks.

As a Moabite, she doesn’t know if she’ll be accepted in Bethlehem. She will also have to give up her own country, her own people, her own God. Yet, out of sheer loyalty, Ruth makes this vow. With the younger woman to accompany her, Naomi is more likely to survive the journey back to Bethlehem. Once there, Ruth will be able to search for food for them and, if she is treated well by the community, she may find other ways to support them.

After Ruth and Naomi settle back in Judah, Ruth takes advantage of another custom which is that people in need could follow the harvesters in a field and gather what they’ve left behind. So, Ruth begins to do this as a way of feeding herself and Naomi - again creating hope where Naomi has none. The man who owns the field, Boaz, is very kind to her, offering her a meal right then and there, and ordering his harvesters to leave extra for her to glean.

We soon learn that Boaz is a relative of Elimelech and, therefore, Naomi. While he is unlikely to marry Naomi due to her age, there is the possibility that he would marry Ruth. If so, he would have the responsibility to look after both Ruth and Naomi. So, Naomi encourages Ruth to see if she can catch Boaz’s eye. Yet again, there is the possibility that Ruth can secure their future. Following Naomi’s instructions, Ruth puts on her best clothes and a dab of perfume and goes to find Boaz on the threshing floor. After some late night “negotiations”, Boaz decides he would like to take Ruth as his wife.

In the final chapter of the book, we learn that Ruth has given birth to a baby boy, and this is, perhaps, her most significant gift of hope to Naomi. Not only will they both be safe and secure into the future, but after so much grief and loss, Naomi now has a grandson who will continue Elimelech’s family line. This woman who once lived in despair can see a bright future not only for herself but for the family name she once thought would be lost forever.

As heartwarming as it is, this story of Ruth’s care for Naomi doesn’t seem so much like a call story, a story which supports or illuminates God’s work to save humanity and usher in the kingdom of earth, until we zoom out and look at its greater impact - impact that is directly relevant to us on our own faith journeys today. Ruth’s son, who is named Obed, grows up to be the grandfather of King David and, thus, plays a significant role in the history of God’s people.

That also means Ruth's loyalty to Naomi ultimately leads her to be one of the very few gentiles in the lineage of Jesus. In earlier books of the Hebrew Bible, foreign women are seen as a threat. They may lure Jewish men toward worshipping other Gods than Yahweh. In fact, when the Israelites return from exile in Babylon, men are required to expel their foreign wives from the community of God's people. Yet, in God's calling of Ruth, we see firsthand that God's grace and inclusion extend beyond the Jewish community to all people. Something we will see again and again centuries later in the ministry of Jesus.

So, what is there for us to learn from the story of Ruth? First of all, it is a powerful reminder that even when things seem at their worst, when it's not only raining but pouring, God is at work for good in the world. We may not be able to see it. In fact, we may feel, as Naomi did, that God has deserted us. Yet, God is still in the movement of good into and through the world. Not only is God at work, but very often God takes the worst of what life offers up to us and turns it into good. Thus, there is always hope - hope for redemption, for healing, for new beginnings.

Secondly, God may call us to be tools of God's work of hope and healing in places and with people that we might never expect. Perhaps that is what God is calling you to right now - to be a beacon of hope in a time and place where hope is so badly needed. That may be in a familiar place like here at church or among familiar people, friends or family members. But it may be as a tutor to a kid in Ypsilanti or even as part of the Peace Corps bringing hope to a country far away.

Finally, Ruth's story of calling reminds us that whatever seeds of hope God calls us to plant today may not grow and become fruitful until after we are no longer here. Out of our hope for the future and faith in a good and loving God, we may touch a life today in such a way that years from now that person goes on to make a huge difference in the lives of others. God is always calling us - just as God called a young, Moabite widow who became a great ancestor to the one who became the light of the world.