

▶ *Faithfulness* ◀

IN THE MIDST OF NAOMI’S TRAGEDY, GOD DEMONSTRATED
HIS CARE AND SOVEREIGNTY.

RUTH 1:11-18; 2:5-12

In his book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis wrote, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid.”¹ People who face tragedy feel both grief and fear. They wonder what the loss means for their future. When grief and fear cloud your path, nothing comforts your heart and gives you the courage to take steps into the unknown like knowing that God cares and controls every moment of your life.

 **How might faith in God’s care and control help a person navigate grief and fear?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

RUTH 1:1-2:23

The book of Ruth comes toward the end of the judges’ rule over Israel just before the start of Israel’s reign of kings. To this point, Israel had been a conquering people. Joshua exhibited great faith as he led the people into the promised land by conquering Jericho. God displayed the beauty of His faithfulness through people like Rahab (Josh. 2), and through Israel’s obedience to march around the walls of Jericho blowing their trumpets (Josh. 6). Later, Caleb demonstrated his trust in the Lord’s sovereignty by asking Joshua to give him the land the Lord promised him years before. In each story, God’s people rose to honor the Lord for His providential care.

However, throughout this period in their history, Israel struggled with idolatry and immorality. God ordained judges to rule the people as they proceeded through cycles of sin, judgment, confession, and deliverance. Israel’s leaders, the judges, and the people needed direction.

The book of Ruth reminds the reader that God’s providence and faithfulness will not fail no matter how dark the times. As the book opens, the writer introduces a Judean family moving from Bethlehem to Moab. Elimelech and Naomi’s two sons married Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. Within ten years, Elimelech and his two sons died.

The story is one of tragic loss, deep loyalty, and God’s faithfulness to Ruth, a foreigner who trusted Him. As the story unfolds, Ruth decided to remain with Naomi after the loss of her husband. She followed God into an unknown future and found God faithful through every trial and hardship. In chapters 1-2, Ruth met a close relative who would have a significant role in God’s redemptive story. Through a foreigner and someone God providentially placed in Ruth’s path, God continued to fulfill His promise of redemption (Gen. 3:15). Assured of His faithfulness, we can walk confidently into every situation in life.

 **Read Ruth 1:11-18; 2:5-12. How do you see God’s care and sovereignty demonstrated?**

EXPLORE THE TEXT

LOSS (RUTH 1:11-15)

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 gods. Follow your sister-in-law.”

VERSE 11

Prior to her plea for Orpah and Ruth to *return home* to Moab, Naomi experienced the unimaginable loss of her husband and two sons. In ancient times, widows and orphans were the most vulnerable people in society. Laws were set in place to protect widows from extortion and mistreatment (Deut. 14:29). Naomi felt the weight of providing for her two daughters-in-law. Her security was lost and her future bleak.

Furthermore, Naomi rebuked Orpah and Ruth for their desire to stay with her; it did not make sense. On the one hand, if they went with Naomi, would they be accepted by the people in Bethlehem? Would the daughters-in-law be beyond childbearing age by the time Naomi found a new husband and had two sons? Naomi knew the best option was for Orpah and Ruth to return home to find husbands and raise children. One thing seemed obvious, the two young women felt at home with Naomi and did not want to leave her.

Orpah and Ruth could have considered the Israelite custom of levirate marriage. Levirate marriage involved a close family member, such as a brother-in-law marrying his brother’s widow to preserve the family through progeny (Deut. 25:5-6). The oldest brother-in-law had the obligation to marry his brother’s widow, and as such, he inherited all of his dead brother’s estate. The importance of levirate marriage was the perpetuation of the deceased’s name in Israel.

Two stipulations had to be met. First, levirate marriage was obligatory only if the one it fell to was alive when his brother died. Someone who was born after his brother's death did not hold this obligation. Second, both of the brothers had to be born of the same father. If either of these two stipulations were not met, the widow was free to marry anyone of her choosing. Naomi gives no evidence of pursuing this for her daughters-in-law. More than likely, she did not think of this since the two girls were Moabite women.

VERSES 12-13

Naomi revealed her true feelings. She loved the two girls as her own daughters. But logically speaking, it made no sense for them to stay with her. They had their whole lives ahead of them. Even if Naomi could bear children, it would be foolish to think they would wait since it would put them beyond childbearing years. They needed to remarry, and, in Naomi's mind, the best place for them to find husbands was in Moab.

Naomi's concluding statement expressed the pain of her loss: ***No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the LORD's hand has turned against me.*** Naomi's losses embittered her soul. Later, as they entered Bethlehem, Naomi expressed her bitterness by calling herself *Mara* (bitterness), "for the Almighty has made me very bitter." She continued, "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has opposed me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?" (1:20-21). Loss can embitter our hearts and cloud the realities of God's care and provisions. Naomi soon discovered that God had not abandoned her but provided through her a greater expression of His faithfulness.

VERSES 14-15

When Naomi's speech ended, the three felt the soberness of the moment. Orpah took the reasonable route, kissed her mother-in-law, and left for home. Nothing more was said of Orpah.

There was no hesitation with Ruth. The text uses the word ***clung*** to describe her decision to stay with Naomi. Genesis 2:24 uses the same word as it describes how a man "leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife." Ruth bonded with Naomi and entered into her uncertain future. She felt deeply the loss of her husband but also the loss in Naomi's heart, and she would not allow Naomi to suffer alone. Sacrificial love enters into the bitterness and pain of another without prejudice.



Why does loss draw some people closer to God, while others struggle with anger toward God? How can the church community be a source of compassion to both?

LOYALTY (RUTH 1:16-18)

¹⁶ But Ruth replied: Don't plead with me to abandon you or to return 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 the LORD 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 talking to her.

VERSES 16-18

Ruth's reply to Naomi's plea to return home demonstrated a deep loyalty birthed out of sincere love. She fully committed herself to Naomi's country, home, people, and God. Ruth not only committed to live alongside Naomi and adopt all the nuances of her life, but to stay with her until death.

Ruth's words capture the beauty of true love. She opened her heart to her mother-in-law without reservation or hesitation. She begged for Naomi to accept her decision to remain with her. She enjoined her life to Naomi's and called on God to witness her promise. Ruth's unselfish loyalty has been quoted, praised, and shared throughout generations. In an age of self-promotion and individualism, loyal love stands out like a rare jewel.

Naomi could say nothing else. Rather than enter into another round of arguments, she accepted Ruth's position. The two widows continued their travels toward Judah, entrusting their futures to the Lord.



What role does loyalty play in our relationships with God and others? What value does society place on loyalty?



How can loyalty be a way to view God's provision and protection?



KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. (See Proverbs 16:33; Romans 8:28.)

PROVISION (RUTH 2:5-12)

⁵ Boaz asked his servant who was in charge of the harvesters, “Whose young woman is this?” ⁶ The servant answered, “She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the territory of Moab.” ⁷ She asked, “Will you let me gather fallen grain among the bundles behind the harvesters?” She came and has been on her feet since early morning, except that she rested a little in the shelter.” ⁸ Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen, my daughter. Don’t go and gather grain in another field, and don’t leave this one, but stay here close to my female servants.

⁹ See which field they are harvesting, and follow them. Haven’t I ordered the young men not to touch you? When you are thirsty, go and drink from the jars the young men have filled.” ¹⁰ She fell facedown, bowed to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor with you, so that you notice me, although I am a foreigner?” ¹¹ Boaz answered her, “Everything you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband’s death has been fully reported to me: how you left your father and mother and your native land, and how you came to a people you didn’t previously know.” ¹² May the LORD reward you for what you have done, and may you receive a full reward from the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.”

VERSES 5-7

After Naomi and Ruth entered Bethlehem, Ruth took the initiative to find work. She gained permission from Naomi to pursue gleaning the grain fields. Gleaners followed behind harvesters, gathering leftovers and reaping the corners of the field. By Jewish law, Ruth

had the right to glean in any field with the landowner's permission. Finding Boaz's field, a close relative to their family, was not by chance. Her steps were established by the Lord (Ps. 37:23).

When Ruth gained permission to glean, she did not know the field belonged to **Boaz**, a relative of her deceased father-in-law, Elimelech. When Boaz noticed her gleaning in his field, he asked, **Whose young woman is this?** He knew Ruth was out of place. His inquiry could have been to her clan or tribe status, but the question also probed whether she was engaged or married to another landowner like himself.

Through the servant's response, Boaz discovered a family connection. In addition to answering Boaz's question, the servant added a previous conversation he and Ruth exchanged at the start. Ruth had asked to follow **behind the harvesters** and gather the fallen grain from the bundles they carried. Harvesting fallen grain in the heat of the Judean fields would take a toll on anyone. The servant commented on Ruth's work ethic and need for a brief rest in a nearby shelter. Seeing her determination despite the harsh physical conditions must have endeared Boaz's heart to Ruth even more than his initial attraction.

VERSES 8-9

Boaz approached Ruth. His tender address gives the reader the sense of immediate desire to protect Ruth. Boaz told Ruth not to glean in another field. He did not want her to go outside of his protection but to stay close to the other female servants.

Boaz ordered his young men **not to touch** Ruth. He also provided for her to drink from the vessels of water reserved for the male servants. Boaz did not treat Ruth with dishonor or disrespect. Her character captivated him. Character held a high status among Jews and early Christians, especially with widows. In the early church, older women taught younger women to live with character and focus on the qualities of godliness (1 Tim. 5:9-10; Titus 2:3-5).

VERSES 10-12

Ruth was bewildered by Boaz's kindness. She had two strikes against her. She was from Moab and a woman. Strangers and widowed women were often targets of prejudice and abuse. However, Boaz noticed Ruth. The word **notice** means Boaz valued her. Such is the love of God who values every person.

Boaz recounted Ruth's story, highlighting her care for Naomi, the decision to leave her parents and homeland, and coming to a

place where she knew no one. Think of the courage, commitment, and faith this took for Ruth. She had no idea how God would provide. But by faith, she trusted God with the remainder of her life.

Moved by Ruth’s character and commitment, Boaz prayed for the Lord to reward Ruth for her love to Naomi. Ruth, being a Moabite woman, had performed kindness to one of God’s covenant people. Not only that, she had come *under* the *wings* of the Lord as her Protector and Deliverer. Boaz used the imagery of a bird. Ruth sought refuge under the care of a close relative. By offering his protection, Boaz honored God and acted as the wings of God’s care (Ps. 91:4; Prov. 14:31).



How has God provided for you in a way that assured you of His care?



How does God’s provision impact the way you view the needs of your family during life’s uncertainties?



BIBLE SKILL: *Use Bible study tools to learn more about a place in the Bible.*

Using a Bible atlas, locate Moab and note its proximity to Israel. Why would Elimelech take his family to Moab during the famine in Israel? Read an article about Moab in a Bible dictionary. Use a concordance to find other times Moab is mentioned in the Bible. For each verse, write a summary statement that describes the role Moab played in the biblical narrative.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Believers will suffer loss.
- + We need to allow others to minister to us.
- + Believers can be confident in God’s sovereign ability to provide for our needs.

 **What are some moments of loss experienced by members of your group? How did the loss impact their faith? What specific ways could your group minister to others most effectively during difficult seasons?**

 **God builds our trust through times of loss and uncertainty, but these moments can also shake our faith. How has your faith been impacted during tough seasons? Who has walked alongside you through the pain? What are some life lessons you have learned from God and those He has graciously placed in your life?**



Memorize Ruth 1:16.

Prayer Needs

1. Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed* (HarperCollins, 1961) 3.