

The period in which the events of the *Book of Ruth* take place (the time in which the judges ruled) is among the worst in Israel's history. The last five chapters of the *Book of Judges* contain some of the worst stories in the Bible – tales of assault, idolatry, civil war, thievery, rape, and murder. No enemy does this: Israelites do it to each other. Clearly, the nation has lost its sense of direction. The *Book of Judges* repeatedly states that during this time “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (*Judges 21:25*). The *Book of Ruth* begins in this time of hardship and moves to great heartache.

“In the days **when the judges ruled, there was a famine** in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. 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. But **Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died**, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was **Orpah** and the name of the other **Ruth**. **When they had lived there about ten years**, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, **so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband**.

“Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, **‘Go back each of you to your 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 security, each of you in the house of your husband.’** Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’ But Naomi said, ‘Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, **it has been far more bitter for me than for you**, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.’ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

“So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ But Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!’ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

“So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, **‘Is this Naomi?’** She said to them, **‘Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?’** So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.”

The *Book of Ruth* begins in a time when there is no king and no food. Like many families living in desperate situations today, Naomi and Elimelech leave their hometown of Bethlehem to try and find food and a better life across the border in Moab. It’s hard enough to be a refugee fleeing to a new place to try and survive, but for Naomi she faces the heartache of losing her husband and the father of her two sons shortly after arriving in Moab. She is now a widow and a single mother who must figure out how to survive and keep her family together, and to her credit she succeeds. She raises her sons to adulthood and sees them both married to Moabite women, and then tragedy strikes, and both of her sons die leaving her, in addition to her overwhelming sense of loss and grief, in the incredibly vulnerable position in that time and culture of being a widow with no husband or sons to protect her or help provide for her. There was almost nothing worse than being a widow in the ancient world. Widows were taken advantage of or ignored. They would equate to the homeless in American society. They were almost always poverty stricken. God’s law, therefore, provided that the nearest relative of the dead husband should care for the widow; but Naomi had no relatives in Moab, and she did not know if any of her relatives were alive in Israel.

When we hear about people who suffer losses like Naomi did, it reminds us that **life hurts**. Or as Westley says to Buttercup in the movie *The Princess Bride*, “Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.” Life hurts. There’s nothing very profound about that statement. Anyone can see the pain and suffering that surround us daily and weekly in this world. A five-year-old dies from a gunshot wound, a mother develops cancer, a father of four loses his job, a young person dies from an overdose, and the list goes on. The existence of evil and suffering in the world can keep us from trusting God. “Why would a loving God allow so much pain and suffering in the world?” we may ask. It’s a fair question with no easy answer.

Try to put yourself in Naomi’s place. Naomi said that God was against her. Was she right to think and feel this way? Have you ever felt that God is against you because your world is crumbling around you? How does grief affect a person’s attitude toward God? Naomi means “pleasant, lovely, delightful” and Mara, what Naomi tells people to call her after the loss of her husband and sons, means “bitter.” That tells us all we need to know about her emotional, psychological, and spiritual condition. She is in grief.

Author Edgar Jackson poignantly describes grief this way. “Grief is a young widow trying to raise her three children, alone. Grief is a man so filled with shocked uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person. Grief is a mother walking daily to a cemetery to stand quietly and alone a few minutes before going about the tasks of the day. She knows that part of her is in the cemetery, just as part of her is in her daily work. Grief is the silent, knife-like terror and sadness that comes a hundred times a day, when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there. Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another for many years. Grief is teaching yourself to go to bed without saying good night to the one who has died. **Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they are not and never will be again.** Grief is a whole cluster of adjustments, apprehensions, and uncertainties that strike life in its forward progress and make it difficult to redirect the energies of life.”

There is little in life that prepares us for the death of a loved one. Whether death results from a sudden accident or a sustained illness, it can still catch us somewhat off-guard. Death is so deeply personal and stunningly final, nothing can emotionally prepare us for its arrival. With every death, there is a loss. And with every loss, there will be grief. After the death of his wife, C.S. Lewis wrote a classic book about loss titled *A Grief Observed*. In it he describes what going on without his wife, Joy, was like: **“The act of living is different all through. Her absence is like the sky, spread all over everything.”** Grief doesn’t come and go in an orderly, confined timeframe. Just when we think the pangs of anguish have taken their last breath, another wave sweeps in and we’re forced to revisit the memories, the pain, the fear.”

Sometimes we try to resist the demands of grieving. We long to avoid this holy pilgrimage. We fight against the currents, terrified of being overwhelmed, of being discovered, of becoming lost in our brokenness. We don’t want to walk through what *Psalms 23* calls the “darkest valley,” or “the valley of the shadow of death;” we’d prefer a helicopter pick us up and give us a lift over that painful valley to leave us feeling better on the other side. But the twenty-third Psalm teaches us that when it comes to grief, the healthiest and **best way out of it is to walk through it day by day as an active participant in our own healing.** If we define ourselves as a victim or as powerless in the face of our loss; we will have a much more difficult time rediscovering continued meaning in life. **We are to be an active participant in coming to terms with our grief.** Again to her credit, Naomi does this; she realizes there is no future for her in Moab. She needs to return to Bethlehem where she may find a relative who might help her. She graciously thinks of her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth who she clearly has grown fond of and attached to over ten years as a family. Even though it will be hard for Naomi to lose them, she urges them to think of their futures and to find new husbands, and to continue to embrace and live life. This is an act of selfless maturity and grace on Naomi’s part. Ruth, in one of the great displays of love and devotion in the Bible, pledges to stay by Naomi’s side no matter what, no matter where they go.

Naomi’s experience and life itself teach us that to be human means coming to know, understand, and accept that loss is and will be a part of our life. Many losses or little griefs

occur along life's path. Not all our losses are as painful as others. A lot depends on how much of our life and purpose and love are connected with the person or even the pet that we've lost. When it comes to mourning, culture tells us to move past this process quickly. Take a few days, weeks perhaps, to grieve, but don't stay there too long. Grieving can make those around us uncomfortable. Friends sometimes don't know what to do with our pain. Loved ones struggle to find adequate words to comfort our aching wounds.

Yet grief, as painful a season as it is, is a necessary part of our healing. To run from grief is to run from the very thing that can quell the pain of our loss. English poet and hymn writer, William Cowper, described grief itself as medicine. Grief cleanses the anguish from our souls and sets us back up on the path of life, so we can dance. Grieving is the process God uses to bring us to a place of wholeness. Grieving is God's gift to us. It is a necessary part of our journey and our healing.

However, grieving can be difficult for us. Give yourself space and time, be honest with your emotions, don't grieve alone, and don't lose hope while you're trying to balance your feelings of pain and loss while going forward with your everyday life. I often reflect as I stand in a cemetery doing a service that for the people in front of me their lives will never be the same as they were before having to say goodbye to their loved one. Their world has shifted and changed forever. Yet there are cars driving by the cemetery and for those people the day is just another day.

**It's very important to understand that the ability to love requires that we recognize and accept our need to mourn.** Everyone and everything we love will die; including ourselves. We shouldn't be surprised that people we love die. Of course they do, everyone does. If someone has been blessed to live into their upper 80's or 90's, we shouldn't be surprised if he or she at some point is critically ill or diagnosed with a terminal disease. That is the nature of life. To be human means coming to know loss and grief as a part of our life—it is unavoidable and inevitable. Death, taxes, and change are three things we know will always be a part of our life. So rather than be shocked as if death is something unusual or unexpected in the human experience we are much wiser and much better off taking the approach of recognizing that death is a part of life and therefore I need to live my life in light of that reality.

Being a disciple of Christ doesn't mean denying the very real loss we experience when a loved one dies. It does mean however, that we don't mourn in the same way as those who have no hope. God's life-giving power in Jesus Christ is the force that shapes a healthy disciple's existence, not the power of death. As believers we're invited to consider how God is seeking to be glorified through our health and sickness, our joy and sorrow, our living as well as our dying.

In *John 11*, Jesus says to Mary and Martha who are grieving the death of their brother Lazarus words that also speak to us in the face of the challenges of life and the mystery and seeming finality of death. **"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even**

**though they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"**

**Prayer:** Creator God, the giver of life, when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, when the way is hard, when our hearts are weighed down by grief, loneliness and loss, help us to journey on remembering that the pain we feel now is because of the love and joy that we shared before. Grant us the blessing and comfort of friends and family members to talk to, cry with, and to continue to share life with as we move forward. Thank you for the hope that we have in Jesus, the resurrection and the life, that encourages us to remember that death is not the end of our loved one or ourselves and that one day we will be in your presence in a way beyond our imagination and dreams. Amen.

**Blessing:** Remember, "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." *Psalms 34:18, Psalm 147:3*

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection:**

1. How would you describe Naomi's condition after ten years in Moab?
2. Naomi said that God was against her. Was she right to think and feel this way? Why or why not?
3. How does grief affect a person's attitude toward God?
4. Have you ever felt that God is against you because your world is crumbling around you? Have you ever felt empty and afflicted by God as Naomi did? How did you respond? What did God do in your situation?
5. Are you surprised by Ruth's decision to stay with her mother-in-law? Why or why not?  
Note: Ruth was from Moab, one of the nations that oppressed Israel during the period of the judges (*Judges 3:12*), so there was hostility between the two nations.
6. Whether death results from a sudden accident or a sustained illness, nothing in life can prepare us for the loss of a loved one. What has been helpful for you as you've had to adjust and cope with the loss of a loved one?

### **For Further Reading:**

*Living When a Loved One Has Died* by Earl A. Grollman

*A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis

*Questions and Answers on Death and Dying* by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

*Understanding Grief – Helping Yourself Heal* by Alan D. Wolfelt