

FINDING HOPE IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS

Ruth 1:1

*THE BOOK OF RUTH IS A LESSON ON FINDING HOPE IN A
HOPELESS WORLD*

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FINDING HOPE IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS

RUTH 1:1

This morning, we are going to start a new book. I didn't realize this when I chose the book of Ruth, but as I have started to lay it out for preaching, I realized that the book fits nicely into our modern day situation.

We find the book of Ruth placed in the historical section of our Bibles. It follows the books of Joshua and Judges and comes right before I & II Samuel. In the Hebrew arrangement of the Bible, Ruth falls into the "writings" section. Hebrew tradition also attributes the book of Ruth to Samuel the prophet. I think that would be reasonable because it would be important for Samuel to justify David as the legitimate king of Israel .

The period in Israel 's history when Ruth took place was characterized by religious confusion and chaos. We find ourselves today living in times of religious confusion and chaos and much of it is beyond our control.

Let me give you an example.

One day, a surgeon, an engineer, and a politician were debating which of their professions was the oldest.

The surgeon said, "Eve was made from Adam's rib, and that, of course, was a surgical procedure. Obviously surgery is the oldest profession."

The engineer countered with, "Yes, but before that, order was created out of chaos, and that most certainly was an engineering job."

The politician smiled and said triumphantly, "Aha! And just who do you think created all the chaos?"

If you were to take time to go back to read and study the book of Judges,

which provides us with the historical context of the book of Ruth, you would see that it is very applicable to our world today.

I would like to introduce some of the historical background to the book of Ruth. If we put it into historical context, it will be much easier for us to understand the power of the story. The main idea of this morning's message has to do with the theme of the book of Ruth. **THE BOOK OF RUTH IS A LESSON ON FINDING HOPE IN A HOPELESS WORLD.**

As we study through the background of the book of Ruth, we will be able to identify with its main character in many ways. We often find our world to be uncertain, dangerous, and confusing. But the book is also meant to encourage us that God loves us and cares for us.

I. LIVING IN CHAOS

We Live In Times Filled With Confusion And Fear.

A. THE DAYS OF JUDGES

The first lesson we learn from this verse is that like Ruth, we often find ourselves living in chaos. In other words, **WE LIVE IN TIMES FILLED WITH CONFUSION AND FEAR.** The book starts out, "*In the days when the judges ruled.*" This takes place during the days of judges. Historically, this is an interesting time in Israel's history. Up to this point in their history, Israel enjoyed both times of great victory and great defeat. For example, under the leadership of Moses, they were changed in an evening from a nation of slaves to a free nation that left the powerful Egyptian Empire in ruins. They sang and celebrated God's victory and provision, but it didn't take them long to build an idol and to grumble against both Moses and God when food and water became scarce. They

got all the way to the Promised Land, only to turn back because of fear.

God punished their disobedience by causing them to wander in the desert for 40 years. Then under the leadership of Joshua, they conquered the Promised Land. Here is how the end of Joshua's life is recorded, "*Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel*" Joshua 24:31 (NIV)

So under the strong leadership of Joshua, the Israelites served God faithfully. However, after they started to get comfortable in the land, they started to pick up some of the bad habits of their neighbors who didn't believe in God. They became much like we are today in the United States . Our morals have slipped and we have come to believe everybody has the right to think, believe, and do what we want to do. We have come to accept the model of the popular 70's song,

*It's your thing,
do what you want to do,
I can't tell you who to sock it to,
It's your thing,
do what you want to do.*

Listen how the period of the judges is described, "*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit*" Joshua 17:6 (NIV)

Keep this in mind. The period of the judges fall between the strong leadership of Moses and Joshua and their first King, Saul. The cycle went like this. Israel would forget about God. They would get very worldly and chase after the things of this world. They would become immoral and end up worshipping other gods. Then God would allow another nation to come in and dominate them. They would repent and cry out to God. God would raise up a hero to deliver them and set them free. But after a while, they would slip back into all their same old bad habits. Each cycle, they would do worse things.

Isn't that the kind of atmosphere we live in? We don't think much about God until trouble and catastrophe rock our world. In general, we are a pretty immoral nation. We exploit the poor in our country and around the world. We protect pornography under the constitution. We kill over 1 million unborn children each year. We sell violent and sexual video games to children and our television is getting more sexual and violent as the days go on. We see powerful movements to get religion out of our public life. However, it is not a movement to get religion out of our lives; it is a movement to get Judaism and Christianity out of the public life. Buddhism is fine, Islam is fine, Native American religions are fine, Witchcraft is fine, and all sorts of New Age Pantheistic religions are fine. Our culture only attacks Judaism and Christianity ... perhaps because we worship the one true and living God. Our nation is proud that we accept everything as legitimate and true.

And then something like 9/11 rocks our world and for a time everybody is praying and interestingly invoking the Judeo-Christian God. We get religious and get concerned about morality ... for a while. But now, we are back to normal. The only time we talk about religious issues is when some politician wants to get elected.

The facts are this. If a neutral observer were to come and observe our culture, we would be declared to be immoral and decadent. If we were honest and looked at what our own values are, we can easily see that we as Christians have been extremely influenced by the values of this world. If we were honest enough to come into God's presence, we would have to say along with the prophet Isaiah, *"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty"* Isaiah 6:5 (NIV).

So we could pretty much identify with the days of the judges. Ruth found herself in a cultural situation much like ours. People were self-absorbed. They were pretty much concerned about pursuing their own happiness and

not much concerned about justice and mercy.

B. THE DAYS OF FAMINE

And in a similar but different way, the days of famine characterized this particular time frame. When Moses gave Israel the law, he warned them that if they turned away from God, one of the punishments they would experience was famine. We have a hard time understanding this. But for an agricultural country, famine was devastating. They may starve. In our modern day culture, we are experiencing a famine of a sort. There is not widespread knowledge of the Bible. Our culture is biblically starved.

Almost no young people have a basic religious vocabulary.

Unemployment is high, many people are living without health insurance, children living below the poverty level are increasing to an all time high, schools can no longer educate children properly, and we as a society are not able to protect our children from violence and predators. We are certainly reaping what we have sown.

C. THE DAYS OF MOAB

And like Ruth, we find ourselves living in Moab . Moab occupies an interesting place in Israel 's history. The country of Moab is located directly east of the Dead Sea . It kind of occupies the land of modern day Jordan . The first time we read about Moab in connection with Hebrew history is when Abraham's nephew Lot is forced to flee Sodom . One night, Lot 's daughters get him drunk and has sex with him. The offspring of this incestuous relationship becomes the father of the Moabite nation. When the Israelites were marching to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses, the Moabite women came into the camp and seduced the men. God was furious and had many Israelites killed. And to top it all off, Moab wouldn't let Israel pass through their land on the way to the Promised Land. Israel was to have nothing to do with the Moabites. Yet, here we see a Hebrew family going to Moab for deliverance.

I know our world is confusing, uncertain, and sometimes frightening.

However, God has promised to care for us. As we learned in our study through Philippians, Lasting peace, joy, and contentment only come, as we trust in Christ alone. Too many times we fail to trust in God's ways, God's timing, and God's love. We take matters into our own hands and we try to find peace, joy, and contentment in the things of this world. We have let our friends, our culture, our parents, television, radio, and videos define life for us. No wonder we make such a mess out of our lives. No wonder we are not happy or satisfied with life. No wonder we are so frustrated, frightened, and confused. We are Christians and we belong to Christ, but we have rejected God's ways, planning, and timing. We have taken things into our own hands and followed the world. We do characterize the attitude of the people during the time of the judges. We have come to do what we think is right in our own eyes. I think it is accurate to assess our times as chaotic. **WE LIVE IN TIMES FILLED WITH CONFUSION AND FEAR.**

II. LIVING WITH HOPE

Jesus Came To Rescue Us And Set Us Free.

I think I have painted a very bleak picture of our times. I think it's accurate, but bleak. And now I want to remind us of what Paul wrote to the Philippians. Rejoice! Wait a minute; let me think about that. Yes, I'll say it again, rejoice! Rejoice always in all things. The book of Ruth helps us to re-calibrate our lives. The Book of Ruth reminds us that because we serve the risen Lord Jesus we are to be living in hope. In other words, **JESUS CAME TO RESCUE US AND SET US FREE.** The major themes of this book are redemption and loving-kindness. I will explain these themes as we study through the book. But let me just point this out from the beginning. This story starts out from, and returns to, the city of Bethlehem in the region of Judah .

A. JUDAH

Let's start with Judah . It's a good place to talk about redemption. Every tribe and every family was given some land. If someone fell on hard times, they could sell their land or even themselves into slavery. A redeemer would be a family member moved by love to buy back the land and buy back his relative out of slavery. It was an incredible act of love. Also because of this love, if a relative died and had no children, this redeemer should have sex with the wife, care for her and produce an heir. Now here is the interesting part. The redeemer gets nothing out of this. He spends the money to redeem the land and care for his relative's wife. When the children grow up, all the inheritance goes to the wife and the children. The redeemer gets nothing.

When Adam and Eve sinned, they sold all of us into the slavery of sin and death. God promised them that because of His incredible love, He would send a redeemer. As Jacob blessed his children, God promised that this redeemer would come from the tribe of Judah . King David, and ultimately our Lord Jesus Christ came from the tribe of Judah . Jesus is our redeemer. We were not only born into the slavery of sin, we willfully chose to live under the slavery of sin. In fact even now going back to the slavery of sin often appeals to us. However, because of God's incredible love, He sent a redeemer. Jesus became our relative. He became our Kinsman-Redeemer. Jesus paid the price for our sin. Jesus suffered, bled and died to buy our freedom. And remember, He got nothing for this. Our redemption costs Him His life. Please, let's keep this in mind as we study through the book of Ruth. We were hopelessly lost until the Lion from the tribe of Judah, Jesus, rescued us and redeemed us.

B. BETHLEHEM

Furthermore, this takes place in the city of Bethlehem . Here is what is interesting about this verse. Bethlehem literally means the *city of bread*. But there is no bread to be found in the city. The book of Ruth is read during the Hebrew holiday of *Shevuoth*. It is also know as the festival of weeks or the festival of Pentecost. It comes 50 days after the Passover

celebration. It is an agricultural festival celebrating the bountiful harvest that God provides. Now I didn't plan this, but we will be exactly in the middle of our study of Ruth when this festival takes place. It usually comes in May or June. Jewish homes and synagogues read the book of Ruth during this holiday because the events in the book of Ruth take place during this time.

The festival celebrates God's extravagant love in providing for us. The city of Bethlehem is where God demonstrated His extravagant love for us. God loved us so passionately that He sent His One and Only Son Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. Jesus came so that we could once again be in a right and restored relationship with God. God's love was the motivation for sending Jesus. Jesus' love was all the motivation He needed to come and rescue us.

And let's not forget the Holy Spirit. Pentecost was the day that God sent the Holy Spirit to the early church. It is love that motivates the Holy Spirit to live in us, gift us, lead us, and empower us. God is our provider, our rescuer, and guide.

C. FAMILY

The festival is also to remind us that we are family. We are responsible **to** one another and **for** one another. When landowners harvested their fields, they were not to go back and pick up any of the wheat or fruit that fell on the ground. They were not to harvest right up to the edge of their fields. They were not to pick trees bare. Fruit and grains were to be left behind so the poor could go and pick up what they needed to survive. Doing it this way would not only provide for the poor, it would preserve their dignity. They wouldn't have to beg, and in some sense, they would have to work to harvest the food.

There is one more little twist to all of this. The book of Ruth traditionally commemorates the giving of the Ten Commandments. During this holiday season, in some Jewish synagogues or homes, people stay up all night

studying the Torah. God has not only demonstrated His love for us by giving us Jesus, He has demonstrated His love for us by giving us the Bible.

On the morning of the festival, the Ten Commandments are read publicly. But just before they read the Ten Commandments, they sing a verse from one of the Hymns we commonly sing, "*The Love of God.*" They sing:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
Were every blade of grass a quill,
Were the whole world of parchment made,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

We are to live in hope because we are loved by the Father. We are to live in hope because we have been redeemed by Jesus. We are to live in hope because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This book is about God's loving-kindness. We need to remember this. **JESUS CAME TO RESCUE US AND SET US FREE.**

I think most of you know me by now. I don't sugarcoat anything. I don't try and sell Christianity by making false promises. The point is this. We live in chaotic, uncertain, and dangerous times. They can be filled with fear and confusion. But God doesn't want us to live in fear. God wants us to live in hope. Why? It is because we know that our redeemer lives. During our next 7 or 8-week study through the book of Ruth let's remember this. **THE BOOK OF RUTH IS A LESSON ON FINDING HOPE IN A HOPELESS WORLD.**

III. EPILOGUE

I don't think I can emphasize this enough. The Kinsman-Redeemer was usually a family member. In Philippians we were taught to be joyful because we worship a powerful God. In Ruth we are going to be taught to be hopeful because we are God's family. We were all adopted. I don't know if this story is true, and I don't know where it comes from but it has a lot to say about our status as God's children no matter where we came from, from a worldly perspective.

"Our Sunday school superintendent had two new boys in Sunday school. In order to register them she had to ask their ages and birthdays. The bolder of the two said, 'We're both seven. My birthday is April 8, 1976 , and my brother's is April 20, 1976 .' "

'But that's impossible!' answered the superintendent.

'No it's not,' answered the quieter brother. 'One of us is adopted.'

'Which one?' asked the superintendent before she could curb her tongue.

The boys looked at each other and smiled. The bolder one said to the superintendent, 'We asked our Dad awhile ago, but he just said he loved us both, and he couldn't remember any more which one was adopted.'"

I love that story. It doesn't matter where we came from. It doesn't matter how rich or poor, how educated or uneducated, how successful or unsuccessful we are. God loves us all enough to redeem us.

"O love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong! It shall forever more endure – The saints' and angels' songs" by Fredrick Lehman.

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