

The book of Ruth illustrates the work of God to fulfil His promises, to bless the faithful—whether native Israelite or foreigner who embraces Him—and eventually move toward fulfilling His promise of blessing to all people. The opening verses describe a dark backdrop of crises against which the brilliance of God's faithfulness in the rest of the book can be seen.

**I. What are the crises that darken the backdrop of Ruth?**

1. *There was a crisis for the nation.* The time of the judges was a dark time for Israel in which sin increased, as “everyone did as he saw fit” (Judg 21:25). God sent enemies against Israel when they were unfaithful, and judges to deliver them when they repented. But they quickly sinned again and even the judges were often marked with weakness and moral failure.
2. *There was a crisis for the region.* Famine struck the land of Judah and perhaps beyond. God had warned that He would send famine, if His people were unfaithful (Deut 11, 28). Hence, famine was more than a food crisis, it was a moral crisis pointing to God's judgment and a need to repent. God's promises and warnings to Israel cannot be applied to every other situation. But they do reveal God's attitude toward sin and what He can do, if He chooses. And He has punished other nations (Lev 18:24–25; 20:23).
3. *There was a crisis for Elimelech.* He faced a decision in the time of the judges, how should he provide for his family. His choice to go to Moab seems more pragmatic than spiritual. There is no indication of repentance for himself or the people. Moab was a spiritually dangerous place (Num 24–25; 31:16; 1 Kgs 11:1, 7, 33). And Moab had been an earlier aggressor (Judg 3:14).
4. *There was a crisis for the family.* Two sons, needing and/or wanting wives, were living in Moab. What would they choose to do? Though God had forbidden marrying foreign women who worshiped false gods, Mahlon and Chilion married Moabite women. Orpah was clearly pagan (1:15) and Ruth probably so. The lack of children may have been God's further judgment (cf. 4:13).
5. *There was a crisis for Naomi.* Naomi became a widow without sons and without grandchildren. Widows and the fatherless were extremely disadvantaged. Naomi was essentially destitute.

It is a dark picture. But having read the rest of the story, we know that God was at work. He eventually would provide for Naomi and for Ruth, and for the entire nation, because the great-grandson of Boaz and Ruth would be none other than King David. Knowing this we can detect slight rays of hope even in the initial darkness.

**II. Where is the hope, the first small reminders of God's faithfulness?**

1. *A reminder of God's faithfulness is implied in the reference to Judah.* The land of Judah (cf vv 1, 2, 7) could have been simply a designation of the location. But with the reference to the patriarch Judah (4:12) it seems to be more. It had been prophesied that the kingship and the Messiah would come from Judah (Gen 49:10). The inclusion of the genealogy of David (4:17–22) affirms this. The covenant which God made with David to establish his house and his kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:16) looks to the Messiah. The mention of Judah therefore calls to mind the prophecy concerning Judah. Israel's rulers would come from Judah. And beyond David there was a ruler coming to whom ultimate rule belonged and to whom the nations would be obedient.
2. *A reminder of God's faithfulness is hidden in the reference to Moab.* Though both an enemy and a spiritual danger, there is more to the story of Moab. Balak, the king of Moab, attempted with Balaam to curse Israel, but God turned it into blessing (Num 22–24). It is the most significant event in Numbers. Except for the killing of Balaam, it is mentioned four other times in the Old Testament (Deut 23:4–5; Josh 24:9–10; Neh 13:1–2; Micah 6:5). Each time it points to God turning the curse into a blessing. Though there are wars with Moab and prophecies against Moab, Numbers 22–24 was a defining event. Furthermore, in that blessing God proclaims, “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” Moab was a reminder of God turning an attempted curse into blessing and the promise of a coming ruler.
3. *A reminder of God's faithfulness is developed in the reference to Bethlehem Ephrathah.* Micah was a prophet many years after David. Yet Micah contains not only one of the four references to Balaam and Balak, it has the only other reference outside of Genesis and Ruth to Bethlehem in Ephrathah. If Ruth was written after Micah, the mention of Bethlehem and Ephrathah together should have jumped out at the readers. This was the town of the promised ruler. If Ruth was written early, after David had become king, the mention of Bethlehem, his birthplace, should have brought the readers' minds quickly to their king, David. It would have been a speck of hope that was enlarged when Micah finally wrote. It concerned not just David, but the one special Ruler that is promised from the line of David.

The first readers of the book of Ruth could have caught a glimmer of hope even in the dark backdrop which the author painted for the story. God could turn a curse into blessing. God had promised a ruler to whom even the nations would yield obedience. God would establish His king forever.

For us the basis of hope remains the same, even though the blackness of the backdrop may have changed. The Son of David, Jesus Christ, is the Ruler to whom ultimately God was pointing, the One toward whom history was moving. You know more than Naomi and have more reason to hope, if you have received God's Ruler, Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior. Whatever your crisis, God has not left His children without hope. Look beyond the darkness to Jesus Christ.