

Homiletics Analysis: Ruth 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Ruth 1 narrates the catastrophic losses of Naomi and her family during a famine-driven sojourn in Moab, and the journey of return that follows. The chapter opens with a Hebrew family — Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion — departing Bethlehem for Moab due to famine. In Moab, the sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Then, in rapid succession, all three men die: Elimelech, then both sons. Left with two foreign daughters-in-law and no male provider, Naomi hears that the LORD has visited His people in Bethlehem and determines to return. She releases both daughters-in-law, urging them to return to their mothers' houses and find new husbands. Orpah kisses Naomi farewell and turns back. Ruth refuses. Her declaration in verses 16–17 — “Where you go, I will go; where you die, I will die” — is one of the most famous speeches in all of Scripture. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. The chapter closes on Naomi's bitterness: “Do not call me Naomi [pleasant]; call me Mara [bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.”

The chapter's narrative moves through three phases: catastrophe in Moab (vv. 1–5), the road back to Bethlehem (vv. 6–18), and arrival with Naomi's lament (vv. 19–22). Each phase advances a double tension: the visible devastation of Naomi's circumstances set against the barely visible but steady movement of God. The LORD is named explicitly in verse 6 (He has visited His people) and in Naomi's bitter speeches (vv. 13, 20–21) — but always at a distance, as the one she perceives has acted against her.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two things simultaneously through this chapter. First, He is establishing that the ground floor of this story is genuine, unresolved human devastation — Naomi's bitterness is not a literary device; it is warranted, and the text does not rush past it. Readers who know suffering, who have named God as the agent of their loss, are invited to see themselves in Naomi without correction or comfort at this stage. Second, God is beginning to display how He works — through the ordinary, the unexpected, and the foreign — to keep His covenant faithfulness moving forward even when it is invisible to those inside the story. Ruth's radical loyalty (*hesed* — covenantal lovingkindness) is the first visible sign that God has not abandoned the thread, even while Naomi cannot yet see it. The intent is not merely to acquaint readers with characters but to begin forming in them a certain posture: eyes open for how God moves in the wreckage, through the unlikely, toward His covenant purposes.

Subject Sentence: In devastating loss, God’s covenant faithfulness moves forward through the unlikely.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to recognize that devastating loss does not mean divine absence — His covenant faithfulness continues moving, often through the most unexpected instruments, even when those inside the suffering cannot yet perceive it.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of Naomi’s bitterness is the primary interpretive issue in this chapter. Some readings treat Naomi’s complaint in verses 20–21 as simple sinful unbelief — a failure of faith to be implicitly corrected by the narrative that follows. This reading errs in the direction of moralism and misses the text’s own tone. The narrator does not rebuke Naomi. God does not rebuke Naomi. The text gives her language of lament full weight: she has lost her husband, her sons, and her means of provision. Her identification of God as the agent of her suffering (“the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me... the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me”) is not presented as theological error requiring correction — it is covenant speech, the speech of someone who knows God is real and active and has found His hand heavy. This is the language of the Psalms of lament (cf. Psalm 88). **The Reformed reading:** Naomi’s bitterness is faithful grief, not faithless complaint. The text honors it. God does not appear here to argue with Naomi about her theology. He will answer her through action, not rebuke. *Acknowledge:* Arminian and broader evangelical readings that see here a call to persevering faith are not wrong to note that Ruth’s declaration demonstrates genuine covenant loyalty — but they too often make Naomi the negative example against which Ruth is the positive model. The text does not frame it that way. Both women are in view; Ruth’s hesed is remarkable precisely because it is free, unrequired, and lavished on a woman who expects nothing more from God.

The identity and function of Ruth’s declaration (vv. 16–17) generates a second interpretive question: Is this a conversion text — Ruth’s embrace of the God of Israel? The text explicitly includes the confession “Your God [will be] my God,” and this is best read as genuine theological inclusion, not merely ethnic loyalty. Ruth is crossing a boundary that Orpah does not cross, and the religious dimension is part of that boundary. However, it is an error to reduce the declaration to a conversion formula or to make it the chapter’s primary emphasis. The declaration is embedded in a relational commitment to Naomi; the theological confession follows and crowns the relational one. **The Reformed reading:** Ruth’s words are simultaneously a covenant of loyalty to Naomi and a confession of faith in Israel’s God. These are not in competition. The covenant of hesed she extends to Naomi is the form her new theological commitment takes. Dispensational readings that emphasize the Israel/Gentile distinction here (Ruth as a type of Gentile inclusion in the

covenant community) are not wrong, but the text does not itself foreground this typological dimension — it is canonical support, not the passage’s own primary claim.

The role of God in the chapter — often described as “hidden providence” — is another significant issue. Some readers find the chapter’s theology thin because God does not speak or act dramatically. This misjudges the chapter’s design. The narrator signals divine movement precisely through the juxtaposition of Naomi’s perception (“the LORD has testified against me”) and the actual unfolding: Ruth’s unprecedented loyalty, the timing of arrival at harvest, the explicit statement that “the LORD had visited his people.” The hiddenness is intentional — it is the very shape of the claim the chapter is making. **The Reformed reading:** The chapter models a theology of unseen providence, in which God’s covenant faithfulness advances through secondary means (human decisions, relational loyalty, historical timing) without requiring a visible theophany. This is characteristically Reformed and characteristically the book of Ruth’s contribution to the canon.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 12:1–3; 28:15** — The Abrahamic covenant commits God to bless His people and preserve the covenant line through all circumstances; Naomi’s near-extinction of the family line is the kind of circumstance the covenant was made to survive.
 - **Deuteronomy 23:3–6** — The law excluded Moabites from the assembly of Israel “to the tenth generation,” making Ruth’s inclusion a remarkable act of grace and anticipating the tensions her presence will create — and which the narrative resolves through hesed.
 - **Psalms 88** — The only psalm with no resolution or reversal, modeling the same covenant lament Naomi voices: “You have put me in the depths of the pit... Why do you hide your face from me?” God takes this speech seriously and does not rebuke it — the Psalter’s inclusion of Psalm 88 corroborates Ruth 1’s treatment of Naomi.
 - **Matthew 1:5** — Ruth’s name appears in the genealogy of Jesus Christ — a Moabite woman, widow, refugee, who chose covenant loyalty becomes a direct ancestor of the Messiah. The full weight of the chapter’s theology of “unlikely instruments” lands here.
 - **Romans 8:28** — “All things work together for good for those who love God” is the canonical declaration that undergirds what Ruth 1 displays narratively: not that loss is not real, but that God’s redemptive purpose is not stopped by it.
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Aim: To demonstrate that the text calls its readers not to quick comfort but to eyes open — learning to see God’s covenant faithfulness moving through devastation and through the unexpected, even before the resolution is visible.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Famine in Judah; Elimelech takes family to Moab	Bethlehem means “house of bread” — the irony is immediate; Moab is outside the covenant land
3	Elimelech dies; Naomi left with two sons	First death; Naomi’s provider is gone
4	Sons marry Moabite women: Orpah and Ruth	Mixed marriages — legally complex under Deuteronomy 23; the narrative will resolve this tension
5	Both sons die; Naomi left without husband or sons	Catastrophic — no male heir, no provider, no future in the ancient world
6–7	Naomi hears the LORD has visited His people; sets out to return	First explicit mention of divine action; Naomi responds to report of God’s provision for Israel
8–9	Naomi releases both daughters-in-law; blesses them; urges return to their mothers’ houses	Her speech is generous and selfless — she is acting in their interest, not her own
10	Both initially insist on returning with Naomi	Loyalty first declared by both women
11–13	Naomi argues the impossibility of new sons to provide husbands; attributes her situation to the LORD’s hand against her	First theological interpretation of her suffering — not denial but attribution; “the hand of the LORD has gone out against me”
14	Orpah kisses Naomi farewell; Ruth clings to her	The word “clings” (קָיָה) is the covenant-bond word of Genesis 2:24 — full weight

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
15	Naomi urges Ruth to follow Orpah back to her people and her gods	The religious dimension of the choice is made explicit
16–17	Ruth’s declaration: “Where you go I will go... your God my God... where you die I will die”	The chapter’s pivot — covenant loyalty, theological confession, irrevocable commitment
18	Naomi sees Ruth is determined; stops pressing her	Quiet narrative acceptance — not celebration, but recognition
19–20	Arrival in Bethlehem; townswomen recognize Naomi; she rejects her name	“Naomi” (pleasant) to “Mara” (bitter) — she is renaming herself by her suffering
21	Naomi’s lament: “I went out full and the LORD brought me back empty... the Almighty has afflicted me”	Raw covenant lament — God is named as the agent of her loss
22	Summary: Naomi returned, Ruth the Moabite with her; they arrived at the beginning of barley harvest	The harvest detail is the first hint of what is coming — a seed of hope placed quietly at chapter’s end

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Catastrophe: Death, Displacement, and Emptiness in Moab
2	6–14	The Road: Return, Release, and the Parting of Ways
3	15–18	The Declaration: Ruth’s Irrevocable Covenant of Loyalty
4	19–22	The Arrival: Naomi’s Bitter Naming and the Harvest’s First Light

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: In devastating loss, God's covenant faithfulness moves forward through the unlikely.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to recognize that devastating loss does not mean divine absence — His covenant faithfulness continues moving, often through the most unexpected instruments, even when those inside the suffering cannot yet perceive it.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] Naomi's bitterness is not the opposite of faith — it is a form of it. She knew exactly who to name when suffering came: "the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me." Many Christians have been taught that honest grief about God's dealings is a faith failure, and they either suppress their lament or conclude that their grief disqualifies them from God's care. This passage refuses that conclusion. Naming God as the agent of your loss — taking your devastation to Him directly, not around Him — is what covenant people do. It is the language of the Psalms, and it is the language Naomi speaks here without rebuke. If you are bitter, take it to the right address.

2. [Affections/Worship] Ruth's hesed — her covenant loyalty lavished freely on a woman who has nothing to offer, who has told her to go, who cannot repay her — is the human-scale image of what God's own lovingkindness looks like. Before you have seen any of what God is about to do for Naomi, you see Ruth. She is not an illustration of a theological idea; she is the first visible movement of grace in this story. Let the beauty of that register. Loving the unlovely, staying with the empty-handed, cleaving to the one who expects nothing from you — this is what hesed looks like in ordinary life. And it deserves more than admiration; it deserves emulation rooted in worship of the God whose character it reflects.

3. [Will/Behavior] The harvest is mentioned in the last verse of this chapter before a single thing has been resolved, before Boaz appears, before any redemption has occurred. God places one quiet seed of hope at the end of the darkest chapter in the book. Your responsibility, right now, in the middle of your loss, is to notice the barley harvest — the one small sign that God's provision has not stopped, even when you cannot yet see how it connects to your situation. This is not toxic positivity or premature closure on grief. It is the discipline of keeping your eyes open even in devastation. Where is the one small sign in your situation that God has not closed the door?

4. [Mind/Belief] Ruth is a Moabite. She belongs to a people excluded from the assembly of Israel by the law of Deuteronomy 23. She has every legal, cultural, ethnic, and religious reason to be outside the covenant story. And yet she is the instrument through whom God will sustain Naomi, preserve the covenant line, and ultimately bring forth the ancestor of David and the Messiah. If you believe God can only work through the qualified, the expected, and the insider, you have misread the book of Ruth from its first chapter. God

routinely selects the wrong person, the wrong nation, the wrong background — not because He is careless, but because He is demonstrating that the advance of His covenant purposes is not contingent on human credentials.

5. [Affections/Worship] Naomi went out full and came back empty — and she says so to God's face. She does not dress it up. She does not protect God's reputation in her lament. And then she arrives in Bethlehem at the beginning of the harvest. The chapter does not resolve the tension between her bitterness and the harvest's arrival — it holds them together. This is the shape of much of Christian life: genuine, unresolved grief and the quiet, early movements of grace existing simultaneously, without explanation. Learn to hold that tension. Do not demand that your grief be resolved before you acknowledge grace, and do not demand that the presence of grace invalidate your grief. Naomi does neither. Worship the God who meets you in both.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ruth 1 establishes one of Scripture's most important principles of providence: God's covenant faithfulness advances not by the suspension of real loss but through it, by means that appear at the time to be merely human and contingent. The chapter does not minimize Naomi's desolation; it narrates it with full weight. But embedded within that desolation is Ruth's hesed, which is both a human act of extraordinary loyalty and the first visible form of God's answering movement. The chapter also establishes that God's purposes are not stopped by ethnic, geographic, or legal boundaries — Ruth the Moabite becomes the first agent of covenant faithfulness in the story. Theologically, this chapter teaches that divine providence operates through secondary causes (human decisions, relational loyalty, historical timing) without requiring visible divine intervention, and that the people of God can speak honest lament to God about their suffering without that lament constituting unfaithfulness.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ruth 1 displays Reformed theology's doctrine of providence with particular clarity: God governs all things — including Naomi's losses, Ruth's decision, Orpah's departure, and the timing of the harvest — without coercion, without theophany, and without the suspension of genuine human agency. The chapter is a narrative embodiment of Westminster Confession 5.2: God's ordinary providence is mediated through second causes, operating according to the nature of those causes. Reformed theology's insistence that God's sovereignty and genuine human decision-making are not in competition is precisely what Ruth 1 demonstrates — Ruth's covenant loyalty is freely given, unrequired, and real; and it is simultaneously the means by which God's providence moves. Furthermore, the chapter's inclusion of Ruth the Moabite in the covenant story anticipates the full Pauline articulation that the gospel breaks down the

wall of ethnic division (Ephesians 2:14) — not by ignoring covenantal distinction but by grace operating outside the boundaries of human expectation. The entire chapter points forward, ultimately, to a Savior who will similarly enter human desolation from outside all human expectation, lavish hesed on those who have nothing to offer, and accomplish covenant purposes through what appears to be catastrophic loss.

Main Takeaway

Your devastation is not evidence that God has abandoned His purpose for you — it may be the very terrain through which He is advancing it. Naomi named God as the agent of her loss, arrived in Bethlehem empty, and at that precise moment the barley harvest had just begun. You do not have to resolve the tension between your grief and His grace. Hold them both. Keep your eyes open for the Ruth He has placed next to you — the unexpected, the unlikely, the one you told to go back, who refuses to leave.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Making Naomi the negative example and Ruth the positive model.** This is the most common homiletical error in Ruth 1. Preachers often implicitly frame Naomi's bitterness as the "what not to do" and Ruth's loyalty as the "what to do." The text does not support this framing. Naomi is not rebuked; her lament is honored. Ruth is remarkable, but she is not presented as Naomi's moral superior — she is presented as God's unexpected provision for Naomi. Structuring the sermon around this contrast produces moralism rather than gospel.
- **Turning Ruth's declaration (vv. 16–17) into a wedding text.** These verses are almost universally read at Christian weddings. The text is not about marriage — it is about covenant loyalty between two women in shared desolation, with an explicit theological dimension (Ruth embracing Naomi's God). Using it as a wedding text is not heretical, but preaching it as a wedding text in this context misses the entire weight of what it means that this declaration is made by a Moabite widow to a bereft mother-in-law who has told her to go home. The more powerful exposition leaves these words in their context.
- **Rushing past the grief to get to the gospel.** Ruth 1 does not resolve in Ruth 1. Naomi arrives bitter. The barley harvest is one quiet detail — it is not a triumphant resolution. Preachers who feel uncomfortable leaving the congregation in unresolved tension will be tempted to leap ahead to Boaz or the redemption or the Davidic lineage in order to "land the gospel." Resist this. The chapter's own design is to hold the tension. Teach people to sit in the tension of Chapter 1, and the resolution of Chapter 4 will be more powerful, not less.

- **Treating Ruth's conversion as the chapter's main event.** Ruth's confession — "your God shall be my God" — is significant and real, but the chapter does not pause to celebrate it. The narrator notes it and moves on. Making Ruth's spiritual decision the climax of the chapter over-reads the text's own emphasis and turns a narrative about Naomi's devastation and God's unseen providence into a salvation testimony. The theological inclusion of a Gentile is canonical weight carried by the whole book; it does not need to become the dominant note of chapter 1's exposition.
- **Failing to name the "hiddenness" of God in the chapter.** God does not speak. God does not appear. God is named twice — once in a report that He has visited His people (v. 6) and twice in Naomi's bitter accusation (vv. 20–21). Preachers who are uncomfortable with divine hiddenness will smooth over this and import a more visible divine presence than the text provides. The chapter's specific contribution to the canon is precisely its theology of providence under hiddenness. Preach what is actually there.
- **Neglecting the harvest detail in verse 22.** The chapter's final phrase — "at the beginning of barley harvest" — is not incidental. It is the narrator placing a single quiet seed of hope at the end of the darkest chapter. Many preachers skip past it as scene-setting for chapter 2. It deserves explicit attention: God's provision has already begun moving in Bethlehem; Naomi does not yet know it; but the reader does. This is the first visible sign in the narrative that the God who "visited his people" (v. 6) has not stopped visiting. Name it.