

## God at Work through Hardship

### From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Ruth

The book of Ruth tells the extraordinary story of God’s faithfulness to Israel in the life and work of three ordinary people, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. As they work through both economic hardship and prosperity, we see God’s faithfulness create opportunities for fruitful work. Their faithfulness to God brings the blessing of provision and security to each other and the people around them.

The story begins with a famine “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1). This was a time when the people of Israel had abandoned God’s ways and fallen into idolatry, horrific social conditions, and a disastrous civil war. The nation had not been following the precepts of *Torah* with respect to work or anything else. As a result, the socio-economic fabric of society was falling apart, and a famine gripped the land.

Responding to the famine, Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons moved to Moab—a move of desperation given the long enmity between Israel and Moab. We do not know whether they were successful in finding work, but the sons both found wives in Moab. Within ten years tragedy struck, and all the men died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law without husbands. The three widows had to support themselves without

the legal and economic rights accorded to men in their society. They had no clear title to land, and no resources with which to make a living.

In this time of hardship, God demonstrated his faithfulness to Israel by restoring the productivity of their land. Naomi decided to return to the land of Israel, and urged her daughter-in-laws to return to their families. Ruth refused. Ruth mirrored God's faithfulness through her faithfulness to Naomi.

“Where you go I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

Ruth's promise was not a plea to stay on as a passive consumer in what remained of Elimelech's household, but a commitment to support her mother-in-law as much as she was able. Although not an Israelite herself, she seems to have been living according to the Law of Israel, as embodied in the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, “Honor your mother and father.” The restoration of productive work for her and her family began with her commitment to working in faithfulness to God's law.

God's faithfulness underlies human productivity, but people have to do the actual work. Ruth was eager to work hard to support herself and Naomi. “Let me go to the field,” she implored Naomi when she got to Israel. When Ruth was given a chance to work, her co-workers reported that “she

has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment” (Ruth 2:7).

Her work was exceptionally productive. When she came home after her first day at work and beat out the barley from the stalks, her harvest yielded a full ephah of grain—approximately five gallons of barley.

Through Ruth’s work, God provided for Ruth and Naomi during their time of hardship. Ruth did not have a steady job with regular hours or a paycheck. She was anxious about whether her station in life would be enough to find “favor” for employment (Ruth 2:12). She went to work anyway. Many of the conditions we face today are deeply discouraging. Ruth’s example is that we are called to work nonetheless. Our work might not even earn any income at first. It could be volunteering to help others, caring for family members, getting education or training, or caring for our homes.

The saving grace is that God is the power behind our work. We do not depend on our own ability or the circumstances around us to provide for our needs. Instead, we work faithfully as we are able. God in turn is faithful to his promise of fruitfulness. This gives us confidence that our work is worthwhile. We can have hope even in the most adverse situations. We are

seldom able to see in advance how God can make use of our work to fulfill his promises. But God's power extends far beyond what we can see.