



SEASONS OF OUR LIVES

GRIEF

Finding Hope in Sorrow

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Contents

Introduction 4

Our Grief 6

God's Grief 19

The End of Grief 33

Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event** or use within a larger group, provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of grief is one of several volumes that explore **Seasons of Our Lives**. While the Scriptures remain constant, we have the opportunity to find within them a fresh message as we go through life facing various challenges. Whether the circumstances in our lives change due to our own decisions or due to the natural process of aging and maturing, we bring with us the actual lived experiences of this world to our prayerful reading of the Bible. This series provides an opportunity to acknowledge our own circumstances and to find how God continues to work in us through changing times.

Our Grief



Begin by asking God to be with you in your prayer and study. Then read through Ruth 1:1-18, the beginning of a story of survival through grief.

Ruth 1:1-18

¹Once back in the time of the judges there was a famine in the land; so a man from Bethlehem of Judah left home with his wife and two sons to reside on the plateau of Moab. ²The man was named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and his sons Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah. Some time after their arrival on the plateau of Moab, ³Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴They married Moabite women, one named Orpah, the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion died also, and the woman was left with neither her two boys nor her husband.

⁶She and her daughters-in-law then prepared to go back from the plateau of Moab because word had reached her there

that the LORD had seen to his people's needs and given them food. ⁷She and her two daughters-in-law left the place where they had been living. On the road back to the land of Judah, ⁸Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD show you the same kindness as you have shown to the deceased and to me. ⁹May the LORD guide each of you to find a husband and a home in which you will be at rest." She kissed them good-bye, but they wept aloud, ¹⁰crying, "No! We will go back with you, to your people." ¹¹Naomi replied, "Go back, my daughters. Why come with me? Have I other sons in my womb who could become your husbands? ¹²Go, my daughters, for I am too old to marry again. Even if I had any such hope, or if tonight I had a husband and were to bear sons, ¹³would you wait for them and deprive yourselves of husbands until those sons grew up? No, my daughters, my lot is too bitter for you, because the LORD has extended his hand against me." ¹⁴Again they wept aloud; then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵"See now," she said, "your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her god. Go back after your sister-in-law!" ¹⁶But Ruth said, "Do not press me to go back and abandon you!

Wherever you go I will go,
wherever you lodge I will lodge.
Your people shall be my people
and your God, my God.
¹⁷Where you die I will die,
and there be buried.

May the LORD do thus to me, and more, if even death separates me from you!”¹⁸ Naomi then ceased to urge her, for she saw she was determined to go with her.

After a few moments of quiet reflection on the passage, consider the information provided in Setting the Scene.

Setting the Scene

Grief is universal. The Old Testament overflows with stories of sorrow. Job lost everything and struggled with faith in the face of despair. The book of Lamentations sings a lament of communal suffering. The Psalms give voice to the sadness, anger, and fear of people overwhelmed by death, disease, and desolation. But the book of Ruth offers a unique glimpse into the dynamics of grief. As the story of two women bound together by shared devastation, this book portrays the full range of human responses to suffering and death. We see Naomi and Ruth experience despair, anger, depression, confusion, and sadness—but also compassion, comfort, determination, and hope. The book stands as a testimony to the power of love and the strength of human resilience. Ruth is a story of our grief: the emotions, experiences, and even unexpected new beginnings that arise from significant suffering.

Grief can spring from a variety of loves and losses, many of which are reflected in Ruth and Naomi’s story. Grief can come from the death of a parent, spouse, child, sibling, grandparent,

relative, or friend. Grief can emerge from secondary losses like the loss of a homeland, job, or relationship. Grief can spring from silent sufferings like infertility, miscarriage, addiction, infidelity, or divorce. As Naomi and Ruth make their way through shock and sorrow following the deaths of their beloveds, the two women ultimately forge a new future together that grounds their shared faith in a firm and unshakable foundation. Turning to their story when we are suffering can open our eyes to the empathy and companionship that Scripture offers us as we grieve.



The entire passage will be considered a few verses at a time. The questions in the margins are for discussion with others. If you are using these materials on your own, use the questions for personal reflection or as a guide to journaling.

Understanding the Scene Itself

¹Once back in the time of the judges there was a famine in the land; so a man from Bethlehem of Judah left home with his wife and two sons to reside on the plateau of Moab. ²The man was named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and his sons Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from

Bethlehem of Judah. Some time after their arrival on the plateau of Moab, ³Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴They married Moabite women, one named Orpah, the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion died also, and the woman was left with neither her two boys nor her husband.

Suffering starts from the first sentence of the book of Ruth. As we are introduced to Elimelech's family, we hear of famine, hunger, and the loss of homeland. Moving to Moab would have been no small feat for a family from Judah, since the Israelites' stance toward these foreigners was harsh: "No Ammonite or Moabite may ever come into the assembly of the LORD, nor may any of their descendants even to the tenth generation come into the assembly of the LORD, because they would not come to meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt" (Deut 23:4-5). Yet as often happens, the reality of need and desperation drives people to leave their home.

The family settles into a strange land, but soon tragedy strikes with Elimelech's death. After their father dies, Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women in direct violation of the Mosaic law (Ezra 9:1-2; Neh 13:23-27). Yet presumably the situation is acceptable to their families as Orpah and Ruth develop a warm and caring relationship with their mother-in-law, seen later in the story. However, the meaning of the sons' names—derived from "weakness" and

“consumption”—indicate a sense of foreboding and may suggest poor health as the cause of their untimely deaths. Sure enough, a decade later both men die, leaving Naomi bereft.

From the opening lines of this story, Naomi’s losses pile up and overwhelm her: first her husband and then both her sons are gone. The end of verse 5 speaks of Naomi’s devastation in simple, stark terms. Much like Job, who lost his children, property, and health, Naomi has lost everything. The death of her husband and sons meant not only the loss of family and companionship but also financial security, personal protection, and social identity. Without men, women in this society held no significance. Ruth and Orpah are equally bereft without their husbands. No children are mentioned for either one, suggesting that childlessness might have been an additional sorrow and burden, as women were defined by their roles as wives and mothers. All three would have been doomed to a life of poverty, prostitution, or starvation if they could not remarry or return to their family’s home. Death has a powerful ripple effect, upending every aspect of life into uncertainty.

⁶She and her daughters-in-law then prepared to go back from the plateau of Moab because word had reached her there that the LORD had seen to his people’s needs and given them food. ⁷She and her two daughters-in-law left the place where they had been living. On the road back to the land of Judah, ⁸Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you to your mother’s

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by loss like Naomi? Where did you turn to find comfort?

What have been “secondary losses” you have experienced from the death of a loved one, like the loss of other relationships, common interests, or a sense of home? How have you dealt with these unexpected parts of grief?

house. May the LORD show you the same kindness as you have shown to the deceased and to me. ⁹May the LORD guide each of you to find a husband and a home in which you will be at rest.” She kissed them good-bye, but they wept aloud, ¹⁰crying, “No! We will go back with you, to your people.” ¹¹Naomi replied, “Go back, my daughters. Why come with me? Have I other sons in my womb who could become your husbands? ¹²Go, my daughters, for I am too old to marry again. Even if I had any such hope, or if tonight I had a husband and were to bear sons, ¹³would you wait for them and deprive yourselves of husbands until those sons grew up? No, my daughters, my lot is too bitter for you, because the LORD has extended his hand against me.”



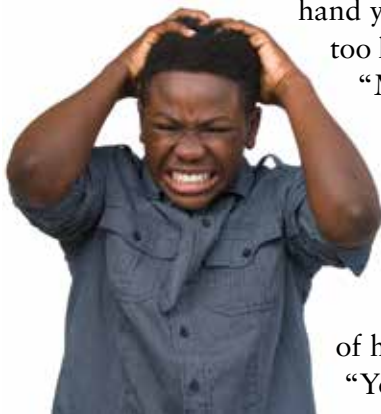
In verse 6, Naomi decides to return home to Judah in search of food. Now it is Ruth and Orpah’s turn to face the loss of their own homeland, while Naomi again prepares to leave behind a country she has come to know. This decision must have weighed heavily on all three women, reflecting how we are often forced to make life-changing decisions in the immediate aftermath of a loved one’s death. The complicated nature of Naomi’s faith after grief is revealed in this passage. Verse 6 shows her to be a woman of faith despite her suf-

fering, desiring to follow where God is working. In verses 8-9, she asks God's blessings upon her daughters-in-law. Yet her words in verse 13 make clear that she feels God has turned against her. Naomi's reactions illustrate how grief can lead us to experience multiple emotions or conflicting beliefs simultaneously.

Naomi claims the lion's share of the grief, having lost her husband and sons. Unlike her daughters-in-law, she is too old to remarry, so she laments that she can replace nothing she has lost. Later in the chapter, Naomi declares that she wants a new name, proof of how she now feels defined by grief and resentment: "Do not call me Naomi ['Sweet']. Call me Mara ['Bitter'], for the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why should you call me 'Sweet,' since the LORD has brought me to trial, and the Almighty has pronounced evil sentence on me" (vv. 20-21). Naomi cannot see beyond her grief and now views the world as a conflict between her and God. Her honesty shows how loss can change our whole worldview as it redefines relationships, beliefs, identities, and our sense of belonging.

The author of Ruth does not begrudge Naomi's bitterness or judge her anger. Our hearts ache for Naomi, for she believes God's hand has turned against her. Her words bear a striking resemblance to Job's: "He has cast me into the mire; / I have become like dust and ashes. / I cry to you, but you do not answer me; / I stand, but you take no notice. / You have turned into my tormentor, / and with your strong

When have you felt conflicted in grief or experienced different emotions at once?



hand you attack me” (Job 30:19-21). Job too hides nothing from God in his grief:

“My own utterance I will not restrain; / I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; / I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (Job 7:11). Naomi’s lament also captures the anguish of the psalmist, who does not soften any hard edge of his grief to make it more palatable: “Your arrows have sunk deep in me; / your hand has come down upon me” (Ps 38:3). Anger at God is a natural

reaction when faced with crippling loss, but its presence within Scripture reminds us that lament is still sacred prayer. Many psalms give voice to grief (see Pss 13; 22; 69; and 88). As a woman of faith, Naomi would have had the words of the psalms on her lips and heart. We too can find solidarity in their cries from the pit of darkness.

The three women leave Moab together, but then Naomi changes her mind, declaring that her daughters-in-law should return to their homes in Moab. Perhaps she is pushing them away out of sorrow or perhaps she reconsiders that it would be better for Ruth and Orpah to remain with their people. Whatever her rationale, she blesses her daughters-in-law with words of gratitude for their compassion and hope for a brighter future. The touching description of their kisses and weeping shows the genuine affection between the women (v. 9). But Orpah and Ruth reveal their own strength, protesting Naomi’s decision (v. 10). They speak in unison, showing

Have you been able to bring your honest emotions to God in prayer? What might happen if you shared with God the depths of your sorrow, fear, or anger?

a united front of loyalty to their mother-in-law and concern for her suffering. Yet Naomi persists in what she feels is best in the worst of situations. She calls them “daughters” out of love, yet insists they turn back, saying “go” three times.

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¹⁵“See now,” she said, “your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her god. Go back after your sister-in-law!” ¹⁶But Ruth said, “Do not press me to go back and abandon you!

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Here lies the emotional climax of the book of Ruth. Verse 14 draws us into the intimacy of the women’s affection: weeping, kissing farewell, and clinging together. Orpah decides to leave, perhaps out of loving obedience to her mother-in-law’s wishes. Her decision demonstrates how people make different decisions in grief; there is not one single right way to respond to the events

Have you ever wrestled with decisions that others have made while grieving? How have friends or family struggled to understand your own grief?

Who has stayed by your side through your grieving? Have you felt God present with you in times of struggle?

or emotions that arise after loss. Again the author passes no judgment on any of the women, inviting us to see the range of their responses as faithful and compassionate.

In verse 16, Ruth speaks for herself for the first time. She is bold and strong, making a loving declaration of fidelity and faith. She promises to stay with Naomi no matter what happens, making this vow before God in the tradition of formal oaths of loyalty (as in 1 Sam 20:13-17). Ruth decrees that her entire identity will be defined by Naomi, her people, and her God. She will stay with her even to death and be buried near her—a powerful statement for two women so closely acquainted with death. Ruth pledges the whole of her life in love. She too is transformed by grief, but for good. Ruth's words are among the most moving and beautiful in the entire Bible.

Naomi sees the depth of Ruth's resolve and accepts her companionship (v. 18). The two women begin to make their journey together into a new chapter of life. The final message of this passage is clear: clinging together is what carries us through grief—back to God and forward into new life. Ruth and Naomi offer a powerful example of how to unite within devastating circumstances across age, race, background, or temperament. While loss is universal, so is the invitation to grow through grief and to help each other remember we are never alone.



Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Return to the passage in Ruth 1, reading it slowly and prayerfully. What words or phrases speak to you? Let yourself linger with these words or phrases as you let God speak to you.

As you return to the passage, notice what word or phrase grabs your attention. Perhaps this word or phrase leads you toward either Ruth or Naomi in your prayer. At times some of us feel like Naomi in our grief: overwhelmed, angry, bitter, or despairing. At times we can feel like Ruth: strong, loving, faithful, or hopeful. Many times we may feel like a mixture of both. When have you felt like Naomi? When have you felt like Ruth?

Imagine what God might be inviting you to consider as you reflect on each woman's emotions and experience. How might she become a companion for you as you move forward into a new chapter in life after loss?

Living the Word

Grief changes over time. It is rarely linear, but cycles through ups and downs. By the end of the book, Ruth remarries and has a son with her new husband Boaz, making her the great-grandmother of David. Naomi's joy at her unexpected blessing—her own rebirth as grandmother—reveals how Scripture's story of salvation itself winds through times of deep grief. While grief never ends completely, it can evolve as it leads us into

new life beyond sorrow. This week let yourself imagine—even for a brief moment—what it might be like to feel joy and happiness again. Can you trust that grief and loss are not the end of your story, but that new companions, callings, or opportunities for growth might eventually emerge? Ask God for the strength to hope and the courage to believe in light even within present darkness.