

Message Title: “Can God be Trusted?” (Ruth 1:1-7)

Call to Worship:

I. Introduction

A. **Do you trust God?** Before you rush to answer that question, it may be wise to examine your life. I think most of us would be quick to say, “Yes, I trust God.” But that may not be true.

1. Perhaps a better question would be, “**Based on your daily life – your choices, your worries, your fears, your hopes – in whom do you trust?**”
2. I think it’s a better question because most of us would be quick to say, “Yes, I trust God,” yet our lives often say something else. Our lives often say, “**I trust myself,**” or, “**I trust my circumstances,**” or, “**I trust my feelings.**” Whatever they say, many times our lives do not say, “I trust God.”
3. The question of trust isn’t unique to us. Every person going back to our very first parents, Adam and Eve, has had to answer this question. And the people we will encounter in the book of Ruth are no exception. In the first chapter of Ruth, we’re going to listen as this question is answered again and again:
 - a. We’ll hear the nation of **Israel** say, “**We can’t trust God.**”
 - b. We’ll hear **Elimelech** say, “**I can’t trust God.**”
 - c. Then finally, we will hear **Naomi**, Ruth’s mother-in-law, say, “**I will trust God.**”
4. Let’s listen to these people answer the question, “Can God be trusted?” and then answer the question for ourselves.

II. Main Point 1: – We Can’t Trust God: Israel (1a)

A. At the very beginning of the Book of Ruth, we read, “**In the days when the judges ruled...**” This one phrase sets the stage for all the events that will transpire over the next four chapters.

1. In order to understand the context of the Book of Ruth, we have to understand some background about the days when the judges ruled. To do this, I’ll ask you to **turn** back one book in your Bibles to Judges 2:7-19.
2. In this passage, we’ll start off reading about a man named Joshua. Joshua was Moses’ assistant and successor. He was a godly man who served the Lord wholeheartedly. Now let’s gather some context from **Judges 2:7-19**.
 - a. (**read 7-10a**) First, we learn that the **people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, as well as all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua.** The Scripture says that this is because this generation saw all the great things or heard about all the great things God had done for them.

b. **(read 10b)** Then we learn that **after that generation died, another generation rose up that did not know the Lord or the work He had done for Israel.** This is an indictment both on that generation and the generation before them because they did not do what Moses commanded in Deuteronomy 6 – teach their kids about God, His character, and His ways at every possible opportunity.

*This is a pattern that you might recognize in Christian history or even in your own family's history – the **first generation loves** God (Joshua), the **second generation assumes** God (the elders who did not teach their children), and the **third generation rejects** God (the generation that did not know God or His ways).

c. **(read 11-13)** Now begins the sad pattern that would define Israel particularly during this time period, but carry all the way through the Babylonian exile. **The pattern begins with the Israelites forsaking God for false gods and idols of every kind.**

d. **(read 14-15)** The **pattern continues with God's judgment for their idolatry**, which often meant God giving the nation over to be **plundered** (which usually included the complete devastation of crops, as in Judges 6:1-6) or to be **conquered** by their enemies.

e. **(read 16)** The people would then **cry out to the Lord, and he would send judges to rescue them.** The judge would deliver them from their enemies, and the people would seemingly return to the Lord. But it was not to last.

f. **(read 17-19)** The people didn't listen to the judges, and after each judge died (and sometimes before), the **people would begin serving other gods – even becoming more corrupt than their fathers.** And the pattern would start over.

3. You see, at any one point, the Israelites might have said, "We trust God." But their profession is not what mattered; their practice revealed their hearts. Day after day, **their actions screamed, "God cannot be trusted."**

a. Perhaps you recognize a **similar pattern in your own life.** You profess faith in Christ, but slowly and surely you are lured into trusting idols rather than God.

b. Maybe those **idols** are the things we mentioned before: **yourself, your circumstances, your feelings.** Or maybe those idols are **money, or academic success, or sports.**

c. And you **don't notice your idolatry** because it's so very subtle. **But then** you let yourself down. Your circumstances change. Your feelings get hurt. You lose your

job. You fail a test. Your team loses by 20 again to their arch-rivals, this time at home (these are purely hypothetical).

d. When your **idols fail you** and you are left picking up the pieces, it's easy to see that idols are powerless and that **God alone can and should be trusted**. But **instead of exercising real repentance** and placing your trust in God through Jesus Christ, you're only sobered for a moment. Then it's **back to the idols**.

e. This is what Israel looked like in the days when the judges ruled. They said with their lives, "We can't trust God." Maybe that's what your life looks like. Or maybe your life looks more like Elimelech's.

III. Main Point 2 – I Can't Trust God: Elimelech (1b-5)

A. (read 1b-5) When the story of Ruth begins, there is a famine in the land of Judah. And **why is there a famine?**

1. This is what we find in Leviticus 26:14-20: "But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down before your enemies. Those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when none pursues you. And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. And your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit."

2. Based on what we've just read and what we read earlier in the Book of Judges, I think it's **likely the famine mentioned** at the outset of Ruth was God's **judgment on Israel's sin**. They had probably once again turned away from worshiping God to serve idols, and God responded by withholding food from the land.

B. At this point, we meet "**a man of Bethlehem in Judah,**" whose name is Elimelech. Perhaps he is the exception in the nation of Israel – a man who did trust God.

1. But he's not the exception; in fact, he's a perfect example of the typical Israelite man in the days of the judges. If you look at the last verse in the Book of Judges, you have what amounts to the chorus of the book: "**In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes**" (21:25). This is a great description of our day as well.

2. Like everyone else in Israel, Elimelech (whose name, ironically, means "**my God is king**") did what was right in his own eyes. He had to decide in this time of famine if he could trust God, the King of Israel.

3. What he told others, including his wife and sons, is irrelevant. His actions spoke loudly, and they said, "**I can't trust God.**"

a. In response to the famine, Elimelech picks up his family and **moves** them from Bethlehem, which means, “**house of bread,**” to **Moab**, a pagan land whose king and people were historic enemies of Israel.

b. Now, **why does Elimelech take his family to Moab?** Ultimately, it is because he **does not trust God**. He wants to ensure his family doesn’t die from hunger, and using his own **human wisdom**, he decides that he can save his family from death by moving them to Moab.

c. But **what happens** when they get there? Ironically enough, **Elimelech dies**, which leaves his wife and his two boys **without a husband and father** in a pagan land. The **boys marry Moabite girls**, which isn’t expressly forbidden in Scripture but is spoken against because of the tendency of God’s people to succumb to the temptation to worship idols.

d. Then the situation gets even worse. After they lived in Moab for ten years, **Mahlon and Chilion** (whose names mean “**sick**” and “**dying**”) live up to their names and kick the bucket in Moab as well. Now Naomi is left in a pagan land with no men to care for her (no blood relatives at all, actually) – just her two daughters-in-law. Undoubtedly, the **situation is even more desperate** than at the outset of the book.

C. I want to pause for a moment and **consider Elimelech’s life and decisions**.

1. Elimelech may have been different than a lot of men in Israel in the days of the judges. We **don’t have any evidence** to suggest that he or his family were involved in the same **external sins** as the rest of the Israelites. But **at the core** Elimelech had the **same problem** they did – he did not trust God.

2. In making the decision to move his family to Moab, Elimelech likely evaluated his **circumstances**, his **finances**, and his **feelings**. He may have **consulted** with other Israelite men, or even moved there with other Israelite families. We don’t know.

a. What we must conclude, however, is that Elimelech did not consider the spiritual consequences to the decision he made. In moving to Moab, he showed that **he did not trust God** and **placed his family in real spiritual jeopardy**:

1) They were likely to be **influenced by the paganism** around them, if not completely won over to idol worship.

2) His **boys** would have no choice but to **remain unmarried** (which really wasn’t an option at all in an agricultural society based on producing heirs to work the land the family owned) or to **marry Moabite women**.

3) They would have **no opportunity to worship** with other Israelite believers and **submit** themselves to God's appointed leadership, the **judges**.

b. Some of you may be more like the nation of Israel – caught up in a perpetual cycle of sin and disobedience to God, only crying out to Him when things get really bad. The Israelites needed to repent of their trust in other gods and needed to trust God alone, and, if that is you, so do you.

c. **Many of us**, though, are a lot **more like Elimelech**. There isn't overt or overwhelming external evidence that we don't trust God. But if we honestly evaluate our decisions, our worries, our fears, our hopes, it is clear that **we don't trust God**.

d. Israel didn't trust God, and neither did Elimelech. But **Naomi does**. Let's conclude by looking at verses 6-7.

IV. Main Point 3 – I Will Trust God: Naomi (6-7)

A. (read 6-7) In the fields of Moab, still mourning the death of her husband and two sons, **Naomi hears** that God had been kind to Israel and had given them food.

1. I want you to notice what the **text doesn't say**. It doesn't say that anything is wrong in Moab. There is **no famine** there. Moreover, the only two people that she is even kind of related to are Moabites – **Orpah and Ruth**.

2. There is **no reason to return to Israel**; in fact, if Naomi knew her history and watched the nightly news, there are actually about 500 reasons NOT to return to Israel. If the past is a good indicator of the future, it **wouldn't be long before Israel turned away** from worshipping God again and the land was judged again.

a. But in Moab? Things were good. Ideal spiritually? No – far from it. Bad memories there? You bet – her husband and boys were buried side by side in that place.

b. But **there was food**, and **there was some semblance of family**. And **travel** wasn't exactly easy for a mature woman around 1,000 BC in the ancient near east.

B. In spite of all that, Naomi isn't going to repeat the mistakes of her people or her late husband. She is going to trust God and risk dying on the road to go back to God's chosen land and God's chosen people.

1. This is what repentance looked like for Naomi. We don't know what part she played in the initial move to Moab. **Maybe she agreed reluctantly**. Maybe she **hated the idea** and was vocal about it. **Maybe it was her idea** and she nagged Elimelech until he moved the family there. We don't know.

2. What we do know is that **Naomi is living out repentance now**. No matter the cost, she is going back to Israel. And she is going back to Israel because she trusts God to provide for her even though, according to human wisdom, the decision is simply foolish.

V. Conclusion – Do You Trust God?

A. At the very beginning of this wonderful book, you and I are confronted with the question of trust. **Do you trust God?**

1. The first seven verses of this book are a **call to repentance** for you and me, because the answer, to **one degree or another**, is **no** – we do not trust God like we should. Through the examples of Israel and Elimelech, **we see our own sinful distrust of God and our idolatry**.

2. You may have never repented of your sinful distrust of God and your sinful self-trust. Tonight is the night you need to do that. **God is faithful**, and **proved His faithfulness** once and for all in the person and work of Jesus.

a. **Jesus**, who was and is eternal God, came in the flesh to live in perfect faithfulness and trust in God on our behalf. He **obeyed God perfectly and never sinned**.

b. He was put to a **brutal death** on the cross in our place and for our sins, then He **rose from the dead** on the third day. He calls you and I to **trust in Him** for the **forgiveness** of our sins and for the **day-to-day details** of our lives – including what we will **eat** and what we will **drink**.

B. He has proven Himself worthy of our trust, and so is worthy of our repentance tonight. And **God will continue to prove himself trustworthy** through the course of this book.

1. Not only will God **redeem Ruth** – whom we've barely met at this point – but God will **redeem Elimelech's family** by providing an heir through Ruth. God will **redeem Israel** by providing, through Ruth, **King David** – who delivers Israel from her enemies and serves as a type of Christ.

2. And of course, he will **redeem the world** as well through the **Messiah, Jesus** who will come from the house of David, who came from the house of Ruth, who married into the house of Elimelech and Naomi.

3. **God can be trusted** to do what He promises. **The question is simply, "Do you trust God?"**