

**Introduction:**

- A. It was the worst of times. There was a famine in the land, and it was no coincidence of weather patterns. It was a spiritual winter in Judah where everyone did what was right in their own eyes, and no one did what was right in God's eyes. Thus the famine, God's painful attention-getter. Ever have one of those? Has God ever shouted at you through pain?
- B. **Ruth 1:1-2...** The name, Bethlehem, means House of Bread. But there was no bread. Moab, on the other hand, was no place for God's people. They had a sordid history of being spiritual trouble for Israel. They were on off limits. Elimelek, the father, heard there was food in Moab, southeast across the Salt Sea, so he abandoned his God-given, God-famished land to put roots down where Moab's bloodthirsty god, Chemosh, reigned. The irony is that Elimelek's name means "My God Is King." But he ignored his King's warning in **Deut. 23:3**, "*No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation.*" They were going from the frying pan into the fire.
- C. If they thought they were escaping trouble, they were wrong. **Vv.3-5...** There's something here that might not catch our eye that was the worst of all. Our friend, Dr. Lawson Younger, writes, "*The family of Elimelech teeters on annihilation.... When a family died out physically, it ceased to exist meta-physically.*" They had no being. It was as if they had never existed. Erased! [p.417]
- D. Turn to Ruth. I'm writing a book about the church as a family, a home. About six months ago I was telling Lawson that I was having trouble finding an Old Testament

perspective on that idea. “*What about Ruth!*” he said. He’s an OT scholar at Trinity and the author of a very fine commentary on Judges and Ruth. Sure enough, this little gem is the story of a unique family—the kind only God can put together, with much in common with our church family.

While the book bears Ruth’s name, the main character is her mother-in-law, Naomi. Her story here is similar to Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, who left his father for a better life in the far country, only to end up empty.

- I. **LEAVE THE BOUNDARIES OF GOD’S WILL AND YOU’LL FIND YOURSELF IN THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME (1:1-5)**
  - A. Famine, of course, is more dreadful than most of us can imagine, and we shouldn’t fault Elimelek for trying to find food. **But not in Moab.** The writer gives us the impression that no one else in Bethlehem chose this course. While they apparently found food, they had left the sheltering presence of God. Neither of the young couples had children, and all three of the men died there. **Leave the boundaries of God’s will and you’ll find yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time.**
  - B. After 10 woeful years, word came that there was food at home in Bethlehem. In Moab, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah had nothing left but graves so left for Judah. There’s no indication that Naomi wanted to return to her God, Yahweh. No suggestion that she’d seen the error of their ways. It was pretty much like the prodigal son’s realization, “*How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare.*”
  - C. And yet the LORD God of Israel was thinking about Naomi. It was the LORD himself, I’m sure, who made her hungry for home.

Vv.6-18...

## II. THE JOURNEY BACK TO THE GOD-BLESSED LIFE HAS UNMAPPED CROSSROADS (1:6-18)

- A. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah probably thought the toughest part of their journey back to Bethlehem would be those rugged 75 miles around the Dead Sea but it didn't turn out that way. It was their heartbreaking parting. The Bible doesn't tell us but perhaps the two young women accompanied Naomi till she was safely in reach of Bethlehem. Then Naomi came to the moment she'd dreaded, when she had to send her daughters-in-law home.
- B. In that sobbing dialogue take a closer look at **vv.8-9**: *“Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”* Notice the word kindness. This is the Hebrew word *hesed*, and we really need to learn that word because there is no adequate English equivalent. Dr. Younger says that to translate it adequately we need a really long compound word: *covenant-loyalty-faithfulness-kindness-goodness-mercy-love-compassion.*
- This word in the Bible usually applies to God, as in, *“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”* The word *hesed* appears three times in Ruth but the whole story illustrates it. In fact, if this book wasn't called Ruth we could call it *The Book of Hesed.*
- C. Naomi said to the two women, *“May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”* I don't know that I'd fault Naomi for trying to send these two back to Moab because Naomi wasn't very well-

grounded in her faith in God. And her desire that they each still find a husband and home was kind indeed. But she had in mind a kind of bargain-basement rest instead of the rest God offered his people. Recently we've looked at **Matt.**

**11:28-30** where Jesus offers all who come to him "*rest for your souls*"? We will see that come to pass in OT terms in this story of Ruth—not for Orpah back in Moab, but for Ruth in Bethlehem.

- D. In Jesus' story of the prodigal son the most poignant verse says, "*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*" That happens in this story, too, only God is very well disguised!

Look at Ruth's famous words to Naomi in **vv.16-17**, "*Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.*" **That is a *hesed* jewel encased in a velvet-lined vow.**

So far as Ruth knows, she is giving up all hope of a future. Naomi will surely die before she does, leaving her alone and childless in a foreign land. Ruth doesn't love Naomi because she thinks things might turn out better for her. She just loves her, and in Ruth's love for Naomi, the bitter and broken older woman was being touched by the very covenant love of God himself, even though no one realized it then.

We don't know how much Ruth understood of Naomi's God, Yahweh, the LORD. I doubt she understood much when she said, "*your God will be my God,*" but God

himself smiled! What an extraordinary adventure lay ahead of Ruth and Naomi, in the grip of God's *hesed* love. **A new kind of family was being formed, not by blood but by a covenant of self-sacrificing, promise-keeping, merciful, and kind love.**

- E. God's love is more steadfast than Ruth's. Rom. 8:38-39 says, "*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"
- F. Jesus said in **Jn 13:34-35**, "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*" The love Jesus showed and the love he expects us to have for one another is *hesed* love, like Ruth's. We here in God's family are not merely acquaintances or friends. We are family—brothers and sisters, bound together by the love of God for us, and our God-given love for one another.

Now our story turns our attention back to Naomi. **Vv.19-21...**

(Naomi = Pleasant; Mara = Bitter). Her bitterness wasn't angry.

She didn't lash out. But she was defeated and disillusioned, and

she was sure that it was God himself who had defeated her. She

felt that she'd face the rest of her days with God against her at

every step. She could have said, "*I've been in Sorrow's kitchen*

*and licked out all the pots.*" [Zora Neale Hurston] Her griefs had affected

her spiritual eyesight. That can happen.

### **III. BEWARE OF BLINDING BITTERNESS AGAINST GOD (1:19-22)**

- A. We get no sense from Naomi that she even realized that Bethlehem's famine 10 years earlier had been the fault of

God's people. They'd rebelled against God. Furthermore, she seemed to have no clear sense that the griefs in her life were the consequences of Elimelek's move to Moab, where the bloody god Chemosh was worshipped. We don't get a hint that she thought, "*What were we thinking?!*" or "*How foolish we were to run from God.*" I think she believed that God was gunning for her, and it wasn't fair. What's more, there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

You know people who are bitter with God because he didn't stop trouble from coming into their lives. Never mind that they had never loved and served him before; that they ignored him and ran from him. Never mind that He is the King, and owes us nothing. Never mind that they ignore his beloved Son who died for them.

B. Listen again to Naomi said about God in ch.1:

- "*The Lord's hand has turned against me!*" He's not on my side. He's jinxed me.
- "*Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.*"
- "*I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? (Full? Really. You were starving refugees.*"
- "*The Lord has afflicted me;* (The sense is that God has sued me; taken me to court.)
- "*the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.*" (The mighty God has done me wrong.)

C. We learn in my counseling class about "embedded theology," what a person believes about God deep down, regardless of what they might say. Naomi got her theology from her experience, not from what God had revealed, and her embedded theology said God was neither good nor loving. She played this tape over and over in her mind.

Her losses were terrible, but bitterness had become her identity. *Call me Bitter,*” she said. Do you remember the time Jesus asked a lame man, “*Do you want to get well?*” That would have been a good question for Naomi. *Do you want to be Naomi (Pleasant) again? Do you want to see?*

Illus.: I’ve told you before about a woman in my previous church who came up to me after a service with her husband. They had suffered the worst of all losses—their only child, a beautiful daughter, newly-wed, had died of cancer. I’d preached that morning on the care of God and the hope he gives us. When she came up to me, she just said, “*It doesn’t work.*” Naomi would have nodded.

- D. I don’t want to minimize Naomi’s grief but an epic example of *hesed* love was standing right next to her. I sort of imagine Ruth looking over at her, thinking, “*What am I, chopped liver?*” The Father had seen Naomi a long way off and run to embrace her, well-disguised as Ruth, but Naomi’s bitterness had blinded her. Beware of that!
- E. But here’s the thing: God doesn’t keep score like that. God doesn’t say, “*If that’s the kind of attitude you’re going to have, then just go ahead and wallow in your misery, and see if I care.*” There was Ruth, a kind of living down payment on God’s own loving intervention in Naomi’s life. A feast awaited the broken prodigal. A year later these same women of Bethlehem would be saying, “*Naomi has a son!*” But I’m getting ahead of myself.

William Cowper, the hymn writer acquainted with the long darkness of depression wrote, “*God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.*” And...

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds ye so much dread*

*Are big with mercy and shall break  
In blessings on your head.*

Brothers and sisters, when you are in a dark place and it seems God himself has turned against you, remember God's *hesed*—*covenant loyalty-faithfulness-kindness-goodness-mercy-love-compassion*. That is the love that will not let you go.

- F. Then there's the last verse of **ch.1**. The writer makes it sound like he's just turning the calendar page but if you look closely you'll see him wink. **V.22**, "*So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.*" What a coincidence. *Just as the barley harvest was beginning.* Cue the sunset on golden grain.