

Leaving Bethlehem, Returning to Bethlehem

Ruth 1:1-22

Advent: participate in the longing together.

You guys ready for Ruth!? I'm excited and I think you should be excited! And if not, then I'm going to be excited for you! Why?

Ruth is one of the best **short stories ever written**. Who doesn't love a good story?

- "Once upon a time" and "They all lived happily ever after" are cherished phrases.
- **Ruth** has **all the elements of a well-written story**.
- **Characters:** grieving Naomi; loyal Ruth, and compassionate Boaz.
- The **setting:** during the time of the Judges (**Ruth 1:11**); the locations include Bethlehem, Moab, Boaz's field, a threshing floor, a city gate, and a bedroom.
- The **plot** involves **a story of redemption, which we learn is actually part of the grand story of redemption (v 4:17-20)**.
- **Conflict.** Naomi stands in the middle of the **conflict** of the book, **as a widow with no son to carry on the family's (royal) line**.
- **Resolution?** At the heart of the **resolution** is Boaz, a redeemer.

Ruth involves **one of the greatest love stories in the Bible**.

- In many popular love stories, **two unlikely people** unite: a beauty and a beast in **Beauty and the Beast**; a **failed nun and a military captain** in **The Sound of Music**; a **rough neck cowboy and a classy nurse** in **Open Range**; a **stager and an Irish innkeeper** in **Leap Year**, and a **human and vampire** in **Twilight (She's 18, and he's 109!)**.
- **Here: An Israelite gentleman, and a Moabite widow.**

Title. "Ruth" may actually come as a bit of a **surprise**.

- **She is a Moabite!** This is the only OT book named after a non-Israelite.
 - And a *Moabites* were long-standing enemies of Israel.
- **Ruth speaks less than Boaz and Naomi, and when she does, her speeches are shorter than the other two characters.**
 - Based on the **plot**, the book could be named after **Naomi**.
 - Based on the number of **words** spoken, **Boaz** could be given the title.
 - Based upon the importance of a **child (Ruth 4:17)**, **Obed** could also bear the title!
- But "**Ruth**" does indeed make the most sense.
 - **She is present in every scene, except for the city gate scene, and it is through Ruth's actions that Naomi's crisis will be reversed.**

Why We Need to Study Ruth

1. **We need to study it because it is God's Word.**

We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (**Matt 4:4**), and we need the book of *Ruth* **for our own spiritual nourishment**.

2. **We need to see the larger story of God's redeeming grace.**

- Like every other biblical story, Ruth **contributes this overarching story of redemption**.
- **Ruth advances the story of God's redeeming grace to Adam's fallen race**.
- It magnifies God's **hesed**, his **covenantal faithfulness/mercy in sending the King**.

3. *We need a greater appreciation for God's providence.*

- While *Ruth* advances the metanarrative of Scripture, it does not do so generically.
- We have real life details of real life situations in the lives of real life characters, and God working out his plans through these people and these situations.

**Most of us live in the book of *Ruth*,
not the book of *Exodus*!**

- We do not gather manna from heaven every morning and walk through parted seas.
- We live by faith in God's "ordinary providence."
- There are **no miracles** in *Ruth*, but that does not mean God is inactive.
- We must never assume that a lack of miracles means God is not at work.
- He is present in the lives of these seemingly insignificant characters, displaying his meticulous providence, just as he is at work in our lives.
- Our God is working out all things according to the council of his will (Ephesians 1:11), and he is worthy of our trust and adoration.

4. *Fourth, we need to remember God's global mercy.*

- The gospel is not for the Jew only, but for the whole world, including Moabites!
- We need to reflect God's heart for the nations in our lives and ministries.

5. *Finally, we need models of genuine godliness.*

I'll break today's text down into three scenes...

#1: The Sojourn (1:1-5)

Certain words are devastating:

- "We're going to have to let you go."
- "Brace for impact."
- "I'm sorry, but you have cancer."
- "I'm sorry, there was just nothing we could do. He's dead."

Ruth opens with some devastating words.

I read these opening verses to my kids at dinner the other night. When I explained the names of individuals and a bit of the background, they were shocked and perplexed.

After reading about the problems of Israel on a broader national and local level in the book of Judges, *Ruth* zooms in on one particular family's trials and tragedies.

- It takes place during a dark season: when "the judges ruled" (v 1).
- We also read of a "famine" in the land (v 1), likely a sign of judgment.
- And things get even worse, as we read of three funerals.
- We are left with a grieving widow in a foreign land; with her two widowed daughters-in law (v 2-5).

But there's more. We need to read the ending of *Ruth* to see the biggest problem.

- The central focus of *Ruth* concerns the origins of Israel's royal line.
- The genealogy that appears at the end of *Ruth* magnifies this issue (Ruth 4:18-22).

- **The crisis introduced here in Ruth 1:1-4 involves the widowhood of Naomi and Ruth, meaning the royal line is threatened.**
- God had promised to send a King to rule (Gen.17:6; 35:11; 49:10; Num 24:17; Deut 17:14-20).
- In **Judges**, this is threatened **because of widespread unfaithfulness.**
- In **Ruth**, the threat is focused on a particular branch of the royal tree that was in danger of elimination.
- Daniel Block outlines the book this way:
 - Act 1: The Crisis for the Royal Line (1:1–21)
 - Act 2: The Ray of Hope for the Royal Line (1:22–2:23)
 - Act 3: The Complication for the Royal Line (3:1–18)
 - Act 4: The Rescue of the Line (4:1–7)
 - Epilogue (4:18–22)

There is a hint of this royal-line problem in v 1. See Elimelech’s **“Ephrathite” lineage.**

- This was a clan name for a specific population of those in Bethlehem.
- We read of **this family link to David in 1 Samuel 17:12.**
- This subsection of Bethlehem **will factor in later, as Boaz is introduced, who is of the “clan of Elimelech” (Ruth 2:3).**

A. The Judges and Ruth (v 1:1)

- The period **between the settlement into the land, and the establishment of the monarchy.**
- During the time of the judges, there was **no national government.**
- Israel was **a collection of tribes.**
- These judges were **local “chieftains” called to overthrow foreign oppressors.**
- They were **local military leaders, not national political leaders.**

The book of Judges shows the **downward spiral of Israel’s national and spiritual life**, and underlines **the need for a godly king to lead it (Judges 2:11-19).**

A **repeated** downward spiritual of events occur:

- **God’s people rebel against him;**
- **God acts in judgment against his people;**
- **his people repent (at least during the first few cycles);**
- **then God sends a deliverer to give the people a period of rest.**
- There were periods of peace, but those times were few and far between.
- Chapters 17-21 show how the wheels come off entirely (**read 17:1ff**). .

The following line is repeated in the book of Judges, and is the final words we read in the book: **“there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25; see also 17:6; 18:1; 19:1).**

- **It is surprising to find godly examples (Ruth and Boaz) in this time period!**
- **And in this dark season the providence of God shines.**
- Despite sin and rebellion, God is working out his redemptive purposes.

We're not told when *Ruth* fits exactly in the season of the judges. (Best guess: between Ehud, Sampson, Chas 4-12)

- Whenever it took place, the author of *Ruth* (also unknown) sees this whole period of the judges, as **something in the past.** (eg., **Ruth 4:7**).
- So **when was *Ruth* written? We cannot be sure.**
- The two main options are either during Israel's **monarchy** or during the **post-exilic period.** Some who favor the monarchy period see *Ruth* as an argument in favor of David's dynasty, **since some saw David's Moabite ancestry as a problem.**

Further, the placement of *Ruth* in Scripture also generates discussion.

- The Christian canonical order places *Ruth* after Judges, showing the historical flow of things.
- But the location of *Ruth* differs in various Hebrew traditions: **before Songs, before Proverbs 31, and before Psalms.**
- These placements do not change the meaning of *Ruth*, but each conveys a certain **emphasis with which we may read *Ruth*.**
- *Ruth* takes place within the period of the judges.
- Ruth is also the great grandmother of the sweet Psalmist of Israel – the Psalmist who uses phrases we find in *Ruth* **like “refuge,” “wings,” and “kindness”** (eg., **Psalm 91**).
- Ruth and Boaz make a **great Song of Songs-like love story.**
- And Ruth bears a lot of **the traits of the lady described in Proverbs 31.**
 - Both women are energetic and active (**Prov 31:15, 27; Ruth 2:2, 7, 17**).
 - Both work to supply the needs of their households (**Prov 31:15, 21; Ruth 2:18**).
 - Both show kindness (*hesed*; **Prov 31:26; Ruth 3:10**).
 - Both are praised by their husbands and by others (**Prov 31:28-29; Ruth 3:10-11; 4:15**).
 - Both work hard (**Prov 31:13, 27; Ruth 2:2, 17, 23**).
 - Both fear God (**Prov 31:10; Ruth 1:16; 2:12**).

The differences **include their class and race**, but these similarities are present.

But Ruth does **not** have all of these virtues in the **beginning** of the story.

- **She has yet to confess faith in Yahweh, got integrated into Israelite community.**
- This is an important word, as it is **not possible** to live a truly godly life without a relationship with God! **He is the one who forgives sin, and transforms us into holy people.** It's also a word of hope: **God is still in the business of turning pagans into godly saints!**

B. Famine and Faithlessness (v 1:1-2)

The famine even reached **Bethlehem** (which means “House of Bread”).

No Bread at Panera Bread!

Famine was/is **not** always a result of God's judgment, but it **seems to be** the case here.

- That's based upon the unfaithfulness present in the days of the judges, and based upon the **Deuteronomic** cycle present in Judges.

- In the Old Covenant, God promised blessing on his people for obedience, which included things like defeating their enemies and productive crops (Deut 28:1-14).
- But God warned them of curses for disobedience, which included infertility, defeat, and famine (Deut 28:15-68; cf., 1 Kings 16:29-38; 17:1).
- Due to the Israel's disobedience, during the time of Ruth, God's word came true.
- The fields were barren and the crops failed. The barns were empty.
- At the same time, we should remember that God historically used famine to deliver his people and advance his sovereign purposes (Genesis 45:5-8). And He uses famine to discipline and bring people back to him.

This famine should have led the people to repent.

- God promised that he would lift the curse, should they repent (Deut 30:2-3, 8-10).
- But instead of repenting, Elimelech takes matters into his own hands (Ruth 1:2).
- Elimelech's name means, "My God is King," but God is not king of his heart.
- He's like those who claim "Christian" but make decisions and live like the rest of the world.
- Ferguson: "Instead of turning back to the Lord, they turned their backs on the Lord, on go to live in Moab."
- Instead of mourning over the sin of the land, and asking for God to restore things, he and the family left the fields of Bethlehem for the fields of Moab.

We can certainly sympathize with a man wanting to provide for his family, but this was a unique situation.

- This was the Promised Land.
- Elimelech's move was not like a person today migrating to another country out of desperation and opportunity.
- God's presence was promised to dwell in Israel.
- God promised to bless his people there, should they walk in his ways.

Elimelech's journey first appears to be a quick "drive thru," (1:1).

- But then we read of a progression: they "remained" (or "settled") there (v 1:2), and then Naomi ends up living in Moab for ten years (v 1:4).
- It seems they felt more at home in the land of compromise than the land of promise.

Elimelech took with him his wife Naomi ("pleasant" or "sweet." ("Sweety Pie"!))

- He also took his two sons Mahlon and Chilion.
- They sound like cool Star Trek names, but don't name your boys this!
- The name Mahlon is likely derived from a word meaning "sick."
- The name Chilion connotes "frailty and mortality."
- So she has two sons, "Swine Flue and Incurable Walking Pneumonia"
- These names were probably not given by the parents, but are signs/predictions of what is about to happen to them (and Naomi).

Moab – located some 50 miles East, on the other side of the Dead Sea!

- The Moabites trace their origin back to the incestuous relationship between Lot and his oldest daughter (Genesis 19:30-38).

- After the king of Moab, Balak, hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel, a plan was hatched to seduce Israel into sin by participating in false worship and sexual immorality.
- As a result, the Lord slew 24,000 Israelites (**Numbers 25:9**).
- Most recently, Moab oppressed Israel, under **Eglon (Jud 3:14)**. “Now Eglon was a very fat man” (3:17); Ehud stabbed him in the belly & killed him! The 10,000 Moabites are killed.

C. Death and Despair (v 1:3-5)

Things get worse. In Moab, Naomi experiences a nightmare: a triple bereavement.

- Her husband Elimelech dies first (**Ruth 1:3**).

4: These two sons marry Moabite women, **Orpah and Ruth**.

- Based on **Ruth 4:10**, we find that **Ruth** (whose name is likely derived from a word meaning “refreshment”) was the wife of **Mahlon**.
- **The author does not evaluate the brothers’ decision to marry Moabite women.**
- **The law did not prohibit marriages to Moabites specifically (Deut 7:3-4), but marriage to them was discouraged based upon the spirit of the law.**
- Block says, “The Moabites are not listed with these Canaanite nations, but since they were the people of Chemosh, a foreign God, the spirit of the law would have them included.” Further, Deuteronomy 23:3-6 did prohibit Moabite offspring from entering the assembly until the tenth generation.

1:5. One can imagine the grief of Naomi attending funeral after funeral.

Picture her. She is a widow in a foreign land. She has no significance. She has no husband to protect and provide. She has no sons. Consequently, she has no social standing and no hope to carry on her family line. She is aging.

We can identify with Naomi’s grief. And we can identify with what Naomi needed: hope.

Naomi did not know how things would turn out.

- We have the privilege of knowing her whole story.
- It is a story goes from **emptiness to fullness, from tragedy to glory.**
- **The question is, can you still trust God when in the midst of emptiness and tragedy?**
- **Can you still worship God (like Job) in your suffering (Job 1:21)?**

#2: The Return (1:6-18)

The **key word** in this section is the word “**return.**”

- It appears **12 times** in this chapter.
- **Have you ever faced a turning point, a crossroads?**
- Here is a **geographical** and **spiritual** turning point.
- **There’s the turning back to Bethlehem, and Ruth’s turning to Yahweh in faith.**
- It’s a pivotal moment in the story, and in the story of the Bible.

A. God’s Gracious Provision (v 1:6)

We now read of good news! Covenant blessings have returned in the land of promise.

God has “visited” his people with food! And Naomi decides to return.

Grace abounds in this little verse.

1. Naomi is able to “hear” of this good news, while she is in “fields of Moab.”

How would she have heard of this change? She has no television, radio, or social media! Somehow the word made its way to the fields of Moab, and she responded.

2. The fact that God provided food was also a remarkable gift of grace.

This is the first mention of **God** in the book of *Ruth*.

- David writes: The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.” (**Psalm 145:15-16**)
- **In modern suburban and urban settings, God’s gracious provision for our needs is often overlooked.** If you live in place where you frequent a marketplace or a supermarket to purchase food, then you should regularly thank God for his gracious provision. **We should be thankful grocery shoppers!** Alistair Begg says, “**God stocks the shelves.**”

3. Grace is expressed in this word “visit.”

- Throughout redemptive history it is used to speak of God’s gracious intervention in a crisis. In **Genesis 21:1 and 1 Samuel 2:21** the same word is used to speak of **God visiting infertile women**, enabling them to conceive and give birth.
- Interestingly, the book of *Ruth* involves a story about bareness also, and the Lord’s gracious intervention.
- **In verse 6, he visits with food; soon he will visit with fertility.**

4. We see grace in the phrase “his people.”

- The fertile land was a statement: God has not forgotten his people.
- While we do not hear of any acts of repentance, Block states, **the good crops in Bethlehem appears to be the Lord’s response to genuine piety in people like Boaz** (**Deuteronomy 7:12-15; 11:13-15**).
- **Whatever the case, God is mercifully acting on behalf of his people.**

B. The Ladies’ Decisions (v 1:7-18) [Three Conversations/Exchanges]

In *Ruth*, **56 of the 85 total verses consist of dialogue!**

- **“Women like to talk!”** someone said! Well, I know some dudes that can talk too.

Exchange #1: Naomi’s Proposal, Ruth and Orpah’s Protest (v 8-10)

8a: Somewhere along the journey, an important conversation takes place.

- **A turning point, perhaps at a stop for water, during an overnight stay..**
- Naomi shows some **“tough love.”** She tries to persuade them both to return to Moab.
- Not: “Father’s house” but your **“mother’s house” (v 8)**, a phrase that only occurs three other times in the Old Testament, in contexts referring to love and marriage.
- In the following verses, Naomi specifically makes reference to finding a husband in Moab.

8b: Naomi then **offers a prayer for the ladies.** She first says, “May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me” (**v 8b**).

- The word **“kindly”** is the rich Hebrew word **hesed**, speaking of God’s faithful love.
 - It speaks **of his loyalty, faithfulness, grace, mercy, and compassion.**

- **She wishes for Yahweh to be merciful to them in the midst of harsh circumstances.**
- **She believed that God was indeed kind, and that his power and grace extended beyond the borders of Israel, and therein was her hope.**

9a: “The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” (v 9a).

Her specific desire for them: **rest and a husband.**

9b: She kisses the ladies, which then triggers **much weeping.**

10: Ruth and Orpah first object to Naomi’s wishes saying... But then we read of...

Exchange #2: Naomi’s Persistence, Orpah Farwell’s and Ruth Commitment (v 11-14)

11-13a: (read) She says in effect, **“Think it through ladies. Even if I were to have sons in my old age (which I can’t!), you would need to wait years before you could marry them. It’s not going to happen. So go back to Moab where you will have the prospect of another husband. You are better off there!”**

13b: She explains her perspective (v 13b).

She’s wounded, & she shifts her focus from the ladies to an accusation against God.

- She essentially says, **“Why go with me? Things could get worse!”**

Even though Naomi does not interpret things entirely correct, it is important to see that she does at least see God’s involvement in her life. Things were not outside of his sovereign control. She’s not an atheist.

- Hubbard, “In sum, bitter complaint cloaked firm faith.”
- “I believe in Him, but I don’t like him right now!”

14: After first rejecting Naomi’s proposal, Ruth and Orpah now make a decision (v 14).

- **It’s like the cost of discipleship** (eg., **Mark 10:17-31; Luke 9:57-62**).
- **Will they forsake all and follow, or turn back to Moab?**

After more weeping again, **Orpah** makes the decision to turn back.

- From this point, she drops off the pages of Scripture.

Ruth, however, **clings** tightly to her mother-in-law (cf, Genesis 2:24).

- Duguid says, “There was nothing kosher about Ruth. She knew she would be about as welcome in Bethlehem as a ham sandwich at a bar mitzvah.”
- Yet, she clung to her mother-in-law in faith.

Orpah’s decision was conventional wisdom. It was practical.

Ruth’s decision required something more than conventional wisdom; it required faith, the kind of faith we should imitate.

- It is the kind of faith that bears fruit, a relational faith, an active faith.

Exchange #3: Naomi Final Plea and Ruth’s Full Commitment (v 15-18)

15: She reminds Ruth of her theological and national roots.

16-17: Ruth’s stunning profession of faith:

- The center point is most important: **“Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (v 16c).**
- **Ruth isn’t merely expressing devotion to Naomi; she’s expressing faith in Yahweh.**
- Ferguson, **“Listen! I have been converted. Stop urging me to go back; did you hear me? I have been converted.”**

The **poetic structure** of verses 16-17 frames this glorious profession of faith in verse 16c.

Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you (16a)

For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge (16b).

Your people shall be my people, and your God my God (16c).

Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried (17a).

May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you (17b)

- The first sentence (v 16a) and the fifth sentence (17b) belong together.
- The second sentence (16b) and the fourth sentence (v 17a) belong together, showing Ruth’s commitment to live and die in the land of Naomi.
- In the middle is the profession of faith: (v 16c).
- **This Hebrew chiasmic structure magnifies Ruth’s calculated response to Naomi.**

Ruth has counted the cost, and she is following Yahweh and joining his people.

- It literally reads like this: **“Your God, my God. Your people, my people.”**
- **Ruth is not pledging something in the future; she is stating something that she has already done.**
- **She is saying, “Because your God is my God, and you people are my people, then I will go with you.”**
- **You see, Ruth’s confession is not primarily about her commitment to Naomi. It is her commitment to Yahweh.**

It’s arguably the clearest conversion statement in the Old Testament.

- She’s saying, **“The reason I belong to you Naomi is because I belong to Yahweh.”**
- Her statement is like the statement we read when God made his covenant with his people Israel, “And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” (Levi 26:12; see also Gen 17:7-8; Ex 6:7).
- **Ruth is declaring that the God who made a covenant with Abraham; the God who brought the people out of Egypt, is her God.**

Ruth’s conversion **is confirmed in the next chapter**: “the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” (Ruth 2:12).

- Finding **shelter “under wings”** is a statement of personal trust in the Lord (Ps 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4).

Her conversion similar to what Paul says of the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:9).

- This is authentic Christianity: **turning your back on the gods of this world, and everything else, in order to have Christ!**
- **Orpah takes the broad road. Ruth takes the narrow road.**

18: Naomi does not give an answer.

- She does not say, “Wonderful! Let’s go to Bethlehem!”
- No celebration, no selfies. She is just silent (Ruth 1:18).

What We Learn from Ruth’s Conversion

1. The conversion of Ruth is one of the primary answers to the dark providences in chapter 1.

- Ruth will be the conduit through whom God pours his grace to the old bitter widow, Naomi.
- For the struggling nation Israel, Ruth will be the means through whom the nation’s greatest king will come: David.
- For a world separated from God, and lost in idolatry, Ruth will extend the Messianic line, and Jesus Christ will come to be the savior of both Jews and Gentiles.
- We need to see how pivotal her conversion is for the immediate context of Ruth, as well as the context of the greater redemptive storyline.

2. Second, we see our story in Ruth.

- Her transformation should encourage us, and fill us with praise to God.
- We too were once outsiders, but God has made us insiders.
- We too were dead in sin, alienated from God, but in Christ Jesus, we have been brought into a relationship with God (Eph 2:1-22).
- We too worshiped the gods of this world, but we have turned to the living God – by grace! Let us never get over the wonder of grace.

3. We see the relationship of personal faith and the community of faith.

- The phrase, “my people” emphasizes how one is saved into a people.
- Sometimes that community of faith is difficult to love -- just look at who Ruth is with!
- How’s Naomi for a small group leader or prayer partner!
- Churches are filled with Naomi’s.
- Don’t go looking for a church with nothing but Boazs and Ruth’s! – maybe you are in the church to help them out; and not just for yourself.

4. We should never underestimate what God may do through one true conversion.

- Granted, Ruth is a special case, being in the royal line, but it is often just one conversion in a family or a church that creates a glorious gospel movement.
- One conversion often leads to multiple conversions!
- Sometimes it is the conversion of just one person that a church is reawakened to the power of the gospel.
- Sometimes it is just one new believer that brings renewal to long-time saints.

5. Finally, Ruth’s conversion should motivate the church to mission.

- God still converts outsiders!

- Ruth, like Rahab the outsider, heard of mighty deeds of the Lord, somehow, and the Lord brought her to faith (see Joshua 2:10).
- She had lived with Naomi for ten years, and while Naomi does not appear to be a winsome witness, somewhere along the way, Ruth heard and believed.
- Would you pray that God would use you to lead a Ruth to faith?
- We go to the nations, and we recognize that God is bringing the nations to us!
- They are literally down the street!
- Let us pray that God would use us to lead more “Ruth’s” to faith.

Which road will you take, the broad road of Orpah or the narrow road of Ruth?

Alistair Begg tells the story of being at a café one morning in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was sitting down reading the Bible, and looking over his notes for an upcoming sermon. There was virtually no one in the shop at the time. Then a little Chinese student from Harvard entered. She saw his Bible and asked if Begg was a Christian, and he said, “yes, I am.” The young student responded, “I am a Christian too.” Begg asked, “How did you become a Christian in China?” And she responded, **“I entered, through the narrow gate.”**

- That is what happened in Ruth’s life. She entered, and I am glad she did.
- And if you enter, you will not regret following Jesus Christ.
- **Though he does not promise that life will be easy, he does promise to be with you, and satisfy you with his presence forever.**

#3: The Arrival (1:19-22)

The Buzz (v 1:19)

Naomi shows up unannounced and her presence creates a stir in the town.

- Naomi had changed; Physically – emotionally, relationally
- She left as “pleasant one” but returned as grief-stricken one.
- It’s possible that the ladies of the town had heard of all that she went through and were concerned for her.

The Bitterness (v 1:20-21)

20a: One has to admire the transparency and candidness of Naomi.

“Don’t call me Sweetie Pie; call me bitter woman!”

Job: “As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter...” (Job 27:2; see also Job 6:4).

“**Mara**” means bitter, and she says they call her by that name.

“**Mara**” has a rich history.

- In the wilderness, they grumbled against him at Mara (**Exodus 15:22-24**). This is the same chapter in Exodus that begins with the people singing praises to God for delivering them from Egyptian tyranny through the parting of the Red Sea (**Exodus 15:1-21**)!

Like Naomi, we may want to call ourselves “Mara” at times.

- When we feel this way, we need to *remember the Lord’s grace*.

- Whereas she could have looked back on the Exodus events, we can now look back on an **even greater Exodus: Jesus’s incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.**
- **You see, the real empty one was Christ.**
- **He emptied himself (Philippians 2:5-11), leaving heaven for earth, in order that we may receive full forgiveness and eternal life.**
- In our bitterness, **we must remember.**
 - This is why we sing songs of God’s grace, listen to sermons about God’s grace, and speak the gospel to another as a community of faith.
 - This is also why we take the Lord’s Supper weekly. Jesus gave us a sacred ordinance to help us **never forget what he has done for us.**
- **The Lord’s supper is means to fighting bitterness.**
- **He drank the bitter cup for us, that we may drink the cup of grace.**

20b-21: Naomi vents: “the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me..” (v 20b).

- **She attributes her pain to God:** “I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (v 21).
- **Strikingly, there is no hint of personal accountability, like the problem of leaving**
- **She shifts the blame entirely to Yahweh, Shadday (“Almighty,” an abbreviation for El Shadday), the cosmic ruler over all** (cf., Job 5:17; Is 13:6; Joel 1:15).

Block says, “She does indeed ascribe sovereignty to God, but this is a sovereignty without grace, an omnipotent power without compassion, a judicial will without mercy”

- **She views God as the cosmic troublemaker, who has brought this “calamity” on her.**
- **While we admire Naomi’s transparency, the Ruth is the nobler example.**
- Duguid says of Naomi, **“Her body may have made the journey home, but her spirit was far from restored.”**

I think about Cowper’s hymn when I think about bitter Naomi and this whole story:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.*

*Ye fearful Saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding ev’ry hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan his works in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.*

In the midst of the darkness of Naomi, God is working out his sovereign and saving purposes.

The Barley Harvest (v 1:22)

The return trip is complete: **Bethlehem**.

- Ruth is called for the first time “**Ruth the Moabite**,” which will be used repeatedly in the book (**Ruth 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10**).
- This title reminds us of the ethnic tension, and anticipates the drama to come.

Then we read of this word of hope: “**at the beginning of barley harvest.**”

- It was a new beginning agriculturally.
- **Will it be a new beginning in other ways for these ladies?**

Conclusion

So **Ruth 1** begins and ends by talking about **bread**.

- It begins with a mention of a “famine” in Bethlehem (“the house of bread,” **Ruth 1:1**), and it ends with mention of the beginning of “barley harvest” in Bethlehem (**v 1:21**).
- This change of circumstances is owing to God’s intervention: he “**visited** his people,” providing them with food (**v 1:6**).
- Bethlehem of course is associated with **David** (**1 Sam 20:6**), and David’s greatest son, **Jesus** (**Matt 2:1; Luke 2:4; John 7:42**).
- In Bethlehem, **shepherds** were summoned to come and see the Messiah (**Luke 2:8-21**).
- Jesus would be born in the house of bread, and would declare himself to be **the bread of life** (**John 6:35**).
 - **Only in Jesus, can we find ultimate satisfaction and eternal life.**
 - **We are empty until we come and experience the fullness of his grace.**

Bethlehem, this little fertile location just five miles south of Jerusalem was a seemingly insignificant town in the grand scheme of things.

- **But from Naomi’s insignificant family in this little insignificant town will come the Savior of the world, and the King of Kings** (**Micah 5:2**).

They didn’t know, what we know...

Naomi did you know? The King is Coming. The King of Kings is Coming.

- **And he is coming again! Advent. Come Lord, Jesus.**

Lord Jesus,

Come to us —

We who are weary, wounded, sick and sore,

Come to us —

Reign over us, Heal us, that we may weep no more.

We do not always understand what God is doing.

- **But God is at work in the details of our lives.**
- **He reigns over all things, and is accomplishing his saving purposes.**
- **Let us live with confidence in his fatherly sovereignty, and let us worship the King born on Bethlehem, and the King who will reign forever.**