

Going Away and Coming Back – Ruth 1:1-22

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If we were to only read the first chapter of Ruth, it would be pretty hard to figure out what it's really about. That's because the book of Ruth is a story, a story made up of characters, a plot, a problem, and eventually a resolution, which we will explore together over the next 4 weeks.

But the book of Ruth is also a story within a story ... a second story ... if you like.

The whole Bible is the inspired Word of God. It's not just a random collection of histories and stories and letters with some weird apocalyptic stuff thrown in for good measure.

Like an expert rug weaver, God has worked by His Spirit, through many different authors, over thousands of years, to knot together a story that is not only one coherent story but is also a story that reveals the beauty of His grand design for the world that He created.

In order to understand the meaning and purpose of the Book of Ruth in our own lives, we firstly need to understand where it fits into this grand design of God, by knowing why it's so important that the story takes place '**... in the days when the judges ruled**' (1:1).

You might have noticed that the book of Ruth is near the front of the Bible, it's the 8th book in fact, and comes on the heels of God's rescue of His chosen people from out of slavery in Egypt, and their eventual arrival into the Promised Land of Canaan, a place of blessing, a land flowing with milk and honey, with God's people living under the kingship of God Himself.

God's plan was always for His people to live according to His Word, through which they would receive His continued blessing, not only for themselves, but through the actions and lives of the people of God, every nation of the world would be blessed.

But after a time, God's people looked at all the other nations around them, and decided that living according to God's Word was too hard, that it made them far too different from everybody else in the world, and that despite God's undeserved blessing and kindness to them over generations, that they really wanted to have, what all the other nations had instead. They decided that the only way to do that, was to replace God as their King, so that they could be just like all the other nations of the world.

And the book of Judges, is the time and setting within which the book of Ruth takes place, and is all about the people of God rebelling against God's kingship, in order *to do what was right in their own eyes*, and suffering the consequences of this rebellion, through a repeated pattern of God's judgments and rescue by different leaders or Judges, who all called God's people back to living under God's Word and Kingship.

But at the other end of the book of Ruth, the two books of Samuel, tell the story of God's grace and compassion and kindness to His suffering people, by allowing them to put in place a human King who would lead them according to God's Word and Authority. And by doing this, God's people established a royal line of kings, that eventually led to King Jesus.

'... **in the days when the judges ruled**', isn't simply an opening line to a great human story, but gives us a strong clue, that there is so much more to the book of Ruth, than simply the story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz.

But we mustn't forget that is also just that, a human story of loss and bitterness, and of rescue and redemption, that displays the sovereign love and kindness of God, through His superintendence in the actions of other people.

Superintendence is a fancy way of saying that God's actions in the world, are often *invisibly* experienced, through the ordinary actions of ordinary people, but are all sovereignly aligned, to achieving God's ultimate purpose.

But more of that a little later.

Our story opens in the land of Moab, or modern-day Jordan, where we learn that Elimelech had moved his family from Bethlehem in the land of Judah, to avoid the ravages of a famine that had swept over the country of Canaan.

Why Elimelech chose to become a foreigner living in the land of one of Israel's oldest enemies, rather than faithfully remain in God's Promised Land, is unclear. But what is clear, is that the subsequent events that unfolded from his decision to move to Moab, will come to play a vital role in establishing God's plans for Kingship, for His chosen people.

In one of a number of incredible 'coincidences' that occur throughout the book of Ruth, Elimelech's name in Hebrew means, '*God is King*', which is one of those unstated facts, that now knowing where the book of Ruth fits into the Bible, sits out there at the beginning of the story, in order to alert us to look a little deeper, at what's really going on in the unfolding drama.

But this is the last time that Naomi's husband and male children feature in the book of Ruth ... because we learn that Elimelech dies, his two sons marry local women, and then both sons die soon afterwards, leaving, '**the woman**' without them, it says in 1:5.

Whoever the author of the book of Ruth is, they purposefully used the expression '**the woman**', rather than Naomi's name, to show the total loss of identity that Naomi suffered through the deaths of the men in her family.

In this time in history, a woman's value was recognised, through marriage, which earned her a 'name' and a place within a family line. Without a husband or any surviving male heir, Naomi not only lost her sole male protection and provision for her daily needs, she also lost her identity, and simply became, '**the woman**'.

As an older widow without any prospect of remarriage, or having any long-term practical help available to her, living alone in a foreign country she shifted to, away from the Promised Land of God, more than 10 years ago, meant that Naomi's prospects for survival were slim to zero.

It's a story much like that of the prodigal son in the New Testament in Luke 15:11-32. A young man wanting to experience all that the world offers, leaves the safety and provision of his father's house, to travel away to a foreign land, where he eventually loses everything he has.

And, sitting there in a pig farm, eating scraps from the pig's food, he remembers the goodness and generosity of his Father.

Having lost everything, desperate and displaced, it would be hard to imagine Naomi not remembering God's loving provision and care of His people back in Bethlehem.

Even after all the famines and judgments of God, she would remember the stories of His abundance and generosity extended to His chosen people, indelibly written in their shared memory and history.

How, even the name 'Bethlehem', translates into '*the food or blessing of God*', which Naomi now longs for.

Looking on at the tragedy and chaos of Naomi's life, we're left wondering, 'Can Naomi's loss and emptiness ever be filled again'?

But in another stunning 'coincidence', Naomi **hears** (1:6) that '**... the Lord has visited his people with food**'. Just like the prodigal son sitting there hungry, remembering home, on hearing this good news, this gospel, of God's help, Naomi makes the brave decision to return to Bethlehem.

Brave because it was a dangerous journey as a woman without a male escort, brave because she had little food or provisions for the long journey, brave because of the uncertainty of being accepted back by the people of God she had left all those years ago, and brave because it was an admission of her past failures to rely on God to fulfil her needs.

The author of Ruth wants us to ask ourselves whether we might have deserted God in the past, and are now experiencing similar suffering and loss and alienation? Wondering what to do? Naomi's example shows us that God is Lord, even over our failures, and that He offers us a hope and a future, that He calls those who are far away, to return back to Him.

But first, for Naomi, she had to discharge her cultural obligations toward her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Hebrew culture placed a responsibility on Naomi to either produce for them a husband, which she was too old to do, or to find them a husband from within her family line, which she couldn't do because her husband and sons were dead, and she had no relatives in Moab.

Naomi's attempts to encourage Orpah and Ruth to return to their mother's house in v8, show us her deep care and love for them both, rather than abandoning them because of her own loss and grief, but it is a help based on Naomi's view that her own circumstances show how she has been disabled from properly helping them because **'... the hand of the Lord has gone out against [her]'** (v13).

While we can hear Naomi's understandable pain in this statement, we can also see that Naomi's faith in the Lord God has remained as strong as the day she left Bethlehem, because she acknowledges that He is sovereign over all of life. That even in Moab, God's hand, his power and authority to act in creation, is ever present, all the time, everywhere.

Even if Naomi laments in her grief and sorrow, that God is punishing her for past sins, we see in her statement, a deep faith, a faith that acknowledges how we cannot ever, step outside of God's sovereign will.

While Naomi struggled to comprehend God's will, her faith and example has had an obvious impact on Ruth. While Orpah dutifully returns to her people and to their gods, Ruth not only declares her loyalty and devotion to Naomi, but in one of the most powerful statements in this chapter, she also commits herself unreservedly to God, using language that is very reminiscent of God's own promise to His chosen people in Exodus 6:7, **'I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians'**.

Ruth says 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. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!' (1:16-17)**

In the same way that God declared His promise to rescue His chosen people from out of enemy territory, false gods, and great burden, Ruth declares her faith and trust in this same God, based on her commitment of loyalty and care for Naomi.

Despite the loss of her own husband, and the terrible uncertainty of her own future, from out of a foreign enemy nation, Ruth the Moabite, shows more faith in the promises of God, than Naomi.

Naomi's faithfulness recognised God's sovereignty over all things, but her misfortunes challenged her ability to submit to God's purposes, which brought her bitterness and self-doubt.

We are meant to be challenged by this stark contrast between Naomi and Ruth. We are meant to question our own response to God when things go terribly wrong, or don't go the way we had hoped.

Do we blame God like Naomi, or do we commit ourselves to His care like Ruth, even if we don't understand why they might have happened to us?

Arriving in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem, which was a small village at this time in history, rather than large city it is today, the women of the town recognised Naomi, but not as the Naomi that left them more than 10 years ago.

Naomi means 'pleasant', but her desire to be called Mara, 'bitter', reflects her lament that the Lord has dealt bitterly with her, brought her back empty, dealt harshly with her, and that **the Lord Almighty** has brought calamity on her.

But it also tells us that Naomi has returned, knowing that God is Almighty, El Shaddai in Hebrew, and that this deep knowledge of God, is the scaffolding on which her faith is based, that she can place all her loss and pain and bitterness on God, and can leave the explanation of why, and even the responsibility for this bitterness, with Him.

Ruth and Naomi's arrival into Bethlehem may have been the end of their journey from Moab, but it was also their journey from one chapter of their lives to another.

The chapter of their lives that closes at this point has been full of pain and loss, and it leaves a question hanging in the air about whether their pain will fade, and if there can ever be a new beginning?

But look with me to see a glimmer of hope in v22, that tells us that though Naomi may feel empty, she has returned to God's people, with Ruth, a foreigner from Moab, now rescued and redeemed into the family of God.

It tells us of the hope of salvation for people who are far away from God.

It tells us also, that the famine is over, that there is a new harvest, and that Naomi and Ruth have arrived at a time of reaping, a time when their need and their emptiness will begin to be filled.

The focus of chapter 1 in the book of Ruth is Naomi, with Ruth in the background, it is a chapter told from a woman's perspective.

But it is also a chapter that tells the 'second story', a story that lies behind the story. Of a God, which Romans 8:28 tells us '**... works all things together for our good**'.

Naomi recognised this deep truth, that the question is not whether God is involved in every aspect of our lives, but how God is involved.

Just as God called Naomi and Ruth to return to Him from out of the crises of their lives, for us today, God sent Jesus Christ to earth to deal with the crisis of our sin.

Just as God helped Naomi to place the bitterness of her suffering into His hands, the Lord Jesus Christ calls us to place our bitterness and our burdens on Him.

Just as God called Naomi and Ruth to trust in the 'second story' being written alongside their own human story, of God's sovereign love and assurance, that even their pain will have meaning, the Lord Jesus Christ's victory over sin and death, brings about His saving purpose, and an end to all suffering, for those that place their trust and faith in Him.

Like Ruth, we can know that God works all things together for our good, even in the midst of our current circumstances to the contrary, not because we can see their resolution here and now, but simply because we have heard God's promise to us, a promise which is fully revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The whole bible is a story about humanity going away from God, and His great plan of salvation to bring them back again. And at the centre of that plan is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the good news that calls us back, is about something else that God did in Bethlehem, not just for those that live there, but for all of us, whoever we are, and however far we are from God.

It's a new and greater gospel, than the news Naomi heard that turned her thoughts to home, and it's an open invitation to you and to everyone, to come home to the God who loves you ... to the only one who can fill your emptiness, and meet your deepest need.

Like Naomi, you may be bitter, you may even have been away a long time, but the book of Ruth tells us that God is calling you, to come home.