

"Naomi – God Wants to Fill Your Emptiness"

The Book of Ruth

It's always encouraging to hear people's 'God' stories. We soon discover that the story of how God works in our lives intertwines with each other's stories because God saves us in and through community. And God of course is the Master storyteller, bringing different people together to make my story part of your story and your story part of someone else's story, and God sovereignly weaves us all together into one giant story that began in Eden and ends in eternity.

The book of Ruth is really Naomi's story but also Ruth's story and Boaz's story and Elimelech's story and David's story. The book of Ruth begins telling us about a Jewish woman named Naomi who was married to a man named Elimelech and they lived in one of the spiritually darkest times in Israel's history – the time when the judges ruled. The Judges ruled because 'in those days they had no king' and 'everyone did what was right in their own eyes' often including the flawed judges too.

"In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land." A very ominous setting. Famines occurred in Israel when the people of God disobeyed God. Trusting human wisdom rather than God to provide for his wife and 2 sons, Elimelech leaves the land of Israel to live temporarily in the land of Moab; historically an unfriendly neighbour to Israel. By the end of v. 2 we read that they lived there and by v.4 their 2 sons had married Moabite women – not usually a wise move because typically Moabites worshipped other gods. That temporary journey turned into 10 years!! Neither Orpah or Ruth had children. And Elimelech dies. And her two sons die. A coincidence? No.

However, Naomi hears that *"the Lord had come to the aid of His people by providing food for them"* (1:6) so she decides to return home because her only hope is to return to Israel. In Israel she still has her husband's land and her husband's family who might be able to help her, even though she is too old to produce children. And without children she will lose her land and Elimelech's name will not live on.

Naomi's testimony in the book of Ruth is a great Mother's Day message because I believe women can relate with Naomi. Like Naomi, all of us can sometimes feel over-whelmed or unfulfilled because our life in general didn't pan out the way we had hoped God would work things out. We may even think God is against us – as Naomi did.

Yet we need to see the 'Big picture' of our life from God's perspective. And as we see the 'big picture' in Naomi's life we can learn a number of things through her testimony that will help us trust God when life feels unfulfilled at times.

When Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem, her home town, the people are surprised to see her and maybe not even sure it's her at first (1:19). Her appearance may have changed significantly through 10 hard years. But notice Naomi's response in 1:20-21: *"Don't call me Naomi [which means pleasant] call me Mara [which means bitter] because the Almighty has made my life bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me [pleasant]? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."*

Ever felt like that? That God is against you. This is dangerous territory to put ourselves in.

Beware of 'Feeling' that God's Hand is Against You
(Ch. 1)

Chapter one ends with Naomi saying I am empty, God's hand is against me. But was what she was "feeling" true? What we 'feel' is not often what is 'fact'. We only hurt ourselves when we live by 'feeling' and not by faith in what is true. When we are down and tempted to feel like God's hand is against us, what can we do? What should Naomi have done?

Look for ways God shows He cares (1:8)

God cares about His people Israel and removes the famine, implying, He's going to do something for Naomi. What is the name of this book? The book of Ruth. Why? Because God rescues, restores and fills Naomi through Ruth. Ruth is the grace of God in Naomi's life. When Naomi told her 2 daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, their home, and find husbands and make their own families and life, Ruth refuses to leave Naomi. Something about Naomi's faith [at least in the past] must have caused Ruth to place her faith in the God of Israel. She wants to go to Israel and wor-ship the true God. Naomi did not recognize this blessing in her life because she was living by 'feeling' and not by faith. We all do it at times so we need to open our eyes and see what and whom do we have that God is seeking to bless us with.

Look at God's blessing of people in your life, those who are for you. God has not left you alone, He's showing you He cares by providing people and what we need at that time.

Naomi initially has a pity party and blames God for her situation. This is another warning we have to watch out for. When we 'feel' that God's hand is against us . . .

Avoid the lies of self-pity (1:20-22)

When we get down on ourselves or our situation, we start spouting lies:

"Everyone's against me" "I have no friends" "I'm a failure" "No one cares"
"God has forgotten me"

God hadn't made her life bitter; she and her husband made poor choices by leaving Israel and living in Moab too long. Why did she think her sons had no children? Why did Elimelech and her two sons die? These are the unspoken questions the reader should ask. She said she went away full? Well, she did lose a husband and two sons, neither of whom fathered children, but she didn't come back empty; she had Ruth. And Ruth, by God's grace, becomes the greatest blessing Naomi ever had.

No matter how bad things can look, we are never empty. He will never leave us nor forsake us. As we move to chapter 2 Naomi gradually sees this and starts to see God's grace. Like Naomi, we all need to

Trust in God's Grace to Meet Our Needs **(Ch. 2)**

Ch. 1 ends on a note of hope that they arrived in Bethlehem during the beginning of the barley harvest. A hint that God is blessing His people. Barley is the first yield of spring and the famine is over.

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.

Naomi has a well to do cousin of her husbands named Boaz. Another hint to the reader that something good is about to come. Meanwhile, Ruth tells Naomi that she will go to some fields where harvesters are gleaning. God made provisions for the poor in the Law which allowed them to pick up stalks of grain that fell from the harvesters' wagons. Ruth offers to help and Naomi humbly agrees to be helped. When we need to trust God's grace to meet our needs, it often means . . .

Humbling ourselves to depend on others (2:12)

Naomi first thinks she has nothing but she has God and God sends Ruth. And Ruth trusts God because Ruth says that she will pick behind *"anyone in whose eyes I find favour"* (2:2). She is praying that God will guide her and show 'favour' through someone. Likewise, God meets our needs through others too. And uses us to serve others also.

So we begin to see God's favour and care for Naomi. 2:3 says *"As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz."* And guess who arrives and just happens to notice Ruth who he's heard about. Boaz treats Ruth kindly. Tells her where to glean. Commands his workers to watch out for her. He lets her drink from the well and eat lunch with his workers. Why does he show grace to her?

"I've been told all you've done for your mother-in-law ... May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge. 'May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord.' Ruth responds" 2:11-13

Ruth left her home and gods in Moab to live with Naomi and the true God. God is blessing Naomi through Ruth because something in Naomi's life while in Moab must have shown her love and faith in God for Ruth to come with her.

Ruth comes home that day with a huge sack of grain. Naomi is astounded and asks whose field did you work in? Boaz. Boaz just happens to be a kinsmen redeemer. *"The Lord has not stopped showing His kindness to the living [Ruth & Naomi] and the dead [Elimelech]."*

When we need to trust God to meet our needs . . .

Do not doubt God's ability to provide (2:10-13, 19-23)

God sovereignly led Ruth to Boaz, a godly man, who is generous and kind. Naomi and Ruth had no idea where their next meal would come from, yet God provided and more so. God is working in Naomi's life. Naomi wisely starts taking her eyes off herself as she comes out of her pity party realizing what a blessing Ruth is. Self-pity is very self-ish.

Naomi recognizes while she's too old to remarry and have kids again, Ruth is not. So Naomi starts looking out for Ruth. She moves out of her pity party ...

By Ministering to Others Who Have Needs **(ch.3)**

When we 'feel' God's hand is against us, wallowing in bitterness and self-pity, we think we're the only one whose hurting. If you want to help yourself get out of those moments look around you and see who else needs help.

Ruth lost her husband too and she has no child. Naomi realizes it would be selfish for her not to help Ruth find a husband and start a new family. So we have this romantic interlude where Ruth uncovers Boaz' feet while he's sleeping. It is a subtle invitation from Ruth that she is basically proposing to Boaz and wants him to 'cover her' and take her to be his wife. Boaz is older. Why has he never married? He is humbled by Ruth's act but says there's another person who is a closer relative and has legal right to you.

Ruth tells Naomi how Boaz accepted but that he must settle this kinsman –redeemer thing. When Naomi serves Ruth, God meets both their needs. Boaz gives them a larger measure of grain and tells Ruth *“Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”* Empty-handed? God is filling Naomi's emptiness. God is working. It's been a long wait but God is working and Naomi is starting to see it.

The hard part of going through difficult times is it 'looks' like God isn't doing anything. It 'feels' like God's hand is against you. But we can't see at the time where God is working. We can only trust that He is and . . .

Believe God Has a Greater Purpose through our Hardship (ch. 4)

Like Naomi our concerns are often for our present needs. We often don't think about the big picture of what God's doing in ours's and other people's stories. But God doesn't waste our pain on just us, He has a bigger purpose. Which we'll see shortly.

In ch. 4 Boaz goes to court – the elders at the gate – and settles the kinsman redeemer issue. The other relative chooses not to redeem Naomi because he doesn't want Ruth and by buying the land, it remains under Elimelech's name and will belong to whatever descendent Ruth might have. He is more interested in his name – and we never know his name!

Now Naomi can see how God used negative situations to bring them to a great blessing. And we must also if we're to believe God has a greater purpose through our pain.

Let's trace Naomi's circumstances here. God in His sovereignty used Elimelech's disobedience in going to Moab, to provide Naomi with Ruth, a Moabite daughter in law. God sovereignly prevented Ruth from having a child by her first husband. God sovereignly humbled Ruth and Naomi to be so poor they had to glean grains of barley. So God sovereignly directed them to Boaz. And what of Boaz? What about his pain all these years? He had no wife? He had no children? Why? God sovereignly used Boaz's mother, Rahab a former prostitute from Jericho, to help the two Jewish spies stay safe. She placed her faith in God. She knew God would destroy Jericho. She asked that she and her family be spared. She was. In time she married a Jewish man named Salmon and she and Salmon had a son named Boaz. Boaz then was a son of a former Gentile harlot with a Jewish father. Probably why he had never married. Yet he trusted God in spite of his own circumstances because God was saving him for Ruth.

The book has a 'happily-ever-after' ending. Boaz marries Ruth and they have a son and name him Obed. And 4:17 says, *“The women living there said, Naomi has a son’.* You see, the story is about Naomi who is now filled. God filled her emptiness. It took awhile, but she had to trust God. Not only did God fill her emptiness, but Israel's too. Because the time of Judges was a time of empty leadership. There was a spiritual vacuum because the people did only what was right in their own

eyes and not God's. They needed a new leader, one who would direct them back to God. And David would come in about 40 years.

Naomi learned a valuable lesson: that . . .

Life is not about you but about God working through you (4:13-17)

God used Naomi and the negative circumstances in her life to provide for her with Ruth, through whom God would eventually bless the whole world one day by sending Jesus Christ to earth, born of a woman descended from David whose husband Joseph was a descendent of David, of Obed and of Boaz and Ruth.

And let's not forget Elimelech. Why did his parents name him Elimelech? Because in the dark days of the Judges when Israel had no king his parents looked in faith believing that God was still on the throne and named him 'My God is King'. The subtle underlying theme to the book is 'God is still king' even if there is no physical king on the throne.

Is God your king? Maybe you can identify with Naomi. You've felt empty, thinking wrongly that God's hand is against you. Yet He has shown you His favour/grace. Go back and connect where God worked and how and why God did what He did. Can you see how God used negative circumstances to show you that He was doing a greater work through you so that others would grow or come to know Him?

Mother's Day causes us to reflect on our moms but also our lives. It reminds us all of the sovereignty of God, who is ultimately working out His purpose for our good – conforming us into Jesus - so that He gets glorified. Naomi's story should challenge moms – and all of us – that God isn't finished writing His purposes in your story. When we read Ruth, we already know what will happen for Naomi, even as we read the sad story in the first chapter.

We also know how our life will end – happily ever after in the presence of God. Knowing the end changes how you read the story. Knowing the end helps us see our story. We know God has an ultimate purpose to use us for His glory. Like Naomi and Ruth it may be through tough circumstances. We have to trust God's sovereign plan to use us for His greater purposes. And we need to keep our eyes open to the many places He shows us favour and grace.

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