

## The God who sees Naomi

### **Ruth 1 :: English Standard Version (ESV)**

Naomi widowed

<sup>1</sup>In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. <sup>2</sup>The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. <sup>3</sup>But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died; and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and <sup>5</sup>both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Ruth's loyalty to Naomi

<sup>6</sup>Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited His people and giving them food. <sup>7</sup>So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup>But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup>The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband."

Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

<sup>10</sup>And they said to her, "No we will return with you to your people."

<sup>11</sup>But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup>Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should also bear sons, <sup>13</sup>would you wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!"

<sup>14</sup>Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

<sup>15</sup>And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

<sup>16</sup>But Ruth said:

"Do not urge me to leave you, or to return from following you.

For where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.

<sup>17</sup>Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.

May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."

<sup>18</sup>And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

Naomi and Ruth return

<sup>19</sup>So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

<sup>20</sup>So she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup>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?"

<sup>22</sup>So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

## Ruth 4: 13-22

### *Descendants of Boaz and Ruth*

<sup>13</sup> So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. <sup>14</sup> Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a close relative; and may his name be famous in Israel! <sup>15</sup> And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him." <sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him. <sup>17</sup> Also the neighbour women gave him a name, saying, "There is a son born to Naomi." And they called his name Obed (which means serving). He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

<sup>18</sup> Now this is the genealogy of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; <sup>19</sup> Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab; <sup>20</sup> Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon; <sup>21</sup> Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; <sup>22</sup> Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.

## Talk: The God who sees Naomi

### Opening question

How do we respond in those times when things have all gone wrong and our hopes and dreams lie in tatters? Do we despair? Do we blame God? Do we blame other people? Do we look at ourselves and work out how we got there and maybe where we went wrong? Do we turn to God in prayer and ask for His help through the difficulties? How do we move on from that?

I hope that we can find some answers in this story and book of Ruth.

### Roadmap: outline of the talk

- Context of the historical story
- Naomi's problem and how she got there: including the spiritual context
- How did the Lord get involved?
- How did God see Naomi?
- Questions: What we can learn and apply to our lives

### Historical Context

In the Hebrew scriptures Judges and Ruth are one book, so the story of Naomi is at the time of the judges. This is a time that covers around 400 years after Joshua's death and the Israelites have entered the land of Canaan that God had given them. During the time of the judges the Israelites are attacked on many sides by the peoples of the lands around them, usually because they have sinned and broken God's law.

Israel: a theocracy where God reigns over His people, and people trust Him, and follow and obey His laws. **Deut 30** describes how that might look and exhorts the Israelites to choose life and in doing so to trust and follow the Lord. The Lord would provide everything that they need.

By the time of the Judges, the Israelites are not the example of a people ruled by God that God wants to show to the nations. Life for the Israelites has become a vicious cycle: the people sin, they experience attack, they cry out to the Lord, God raises up a judge, they repent, God delivers and they turn to Him for a while and then they get complacent, forget God and start to sin again.

**Judges 3: 1-7 (ESV):** <sup>1</sup>Now these are the nations which the LORD left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all of the wars in Canaan. <sup>2</sup>It was only in order

*that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before...*

The nations were there to teach the Israelites to stand up and fight for God.

*<sup>4</sup>[the nations] were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.*

*<sup>5</sup>So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>6</sup>And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons; and they served their gods. <sup>7</sup>And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs.*

The Lord is testing Israel to see whether they will obey His commandments, given through Moses. But, they are more likely to follow the gods of the nations around them. A phrase that is repeated in Judges: *there was no king in the land and the people did what was right in their own eyes.*

In **Judges 3: 15-21** it says that Israel had sinned in the eyes of the Lord and the Lord strengthens the hand of the king of Moab against Israel and Israel is dominated by Moab for 18 years. God then raises up Ehud, a Benjamite, to save Israel which he does by killing the Moabite king and Israel had rest for 80 years. The story of Naomi is possibly from around this time.

### **Naomi's Problem**

At the end of Ruth 1, we find Naomi in a difficult situation. She has arrived in Bethlehem with her daughter in law. Listen again to what she says to the women of Bethlehem in Ruth 1: 20-21:

*<sup>20</sup>So she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup>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?"*

### **How did Naomi get to that point?**

There are a lot of details missing, and so there is some speculation, but the text does give some clues. To answer this question we need to look at the spiritual context of Naomi and her family.

In Israelite culture the name of a person would often reflect their character or some circumstance of their life and we see this throughout scripture: e.g. Jesus means Saviour. We are told in Matthew 1 that He was named Jesus because He would save people from their sins.

Naomi uses the same linguistic tool: *"Do not call me Naomi [which means my delight] but call me Mara [which means bitterness] because the Lord has dealt very bitterly with me. The Lord has brought calamity upon me.*

In Ruth 1 we are introduced to Elimelech [whose name means My God is King] and his family: wife Naomi [my delight]. They have two sons Mahlon [which means sick] and Chilion [which means pining]. These names may have been descriptive: Mahlon may have been a sickly child; Chilion may have been born at a time when they were pining for something lost, but they do seem quite negative names for one's sons. The family are from Bethlehem [which means House of Bread].

We are also told there is a famine in Israel so they go to dwell in Moab. There is no detail in the text about the circumstances of their move and they may have been told to go there. But if 'My God is King' living in the 'House of Bread' chooses to go to Moab during a famine, perhaps one could ask: *How much did Elimelech and Naomi really trust God to provide for them?*

## Why choose Moab?

- Moab was the son of Lot, by his elder daughter. God gives the descendants of Lot the land of Moab. But in Numbers 22 & 23, Balak, the king of Moab asks Balaam to curse the Israelites. In Numbers 25 the Israelites commit harlotry with the women of Moab and sacrifice to their gods which angers the Lord.
- Already seen that in Judges 3 that Moab has oppressed Israel.
- **Deut 23:3 -6 (ESV):** *“<sup>3</sup>No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever, <sup>4</sup>because they did not meet you with bread and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor to curse you. <sup>5</sup>But the LORD your God would not listen to Balaam; instead the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loved you. <sup>6</sup>You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days forever.”*

It is unclear why Elimelech and Naomi choose Moab, when God said they must not seek the peace or prosperity of Moab. It's not even an easy place to get to from Bethlehem, as is the other side of the Dead Sea. But they are in Moab, a potentially hostile country for Israelites.

At some point Elimelech dies and Naomi is left with her sons, who then take Moabite women as their wives: Ruth (whose name means friendship) and Orpah (whose name means gazelle). This is against the commandment of the Lord. The Lord had made it clear that Israelites were meant to marry within the people of Israel and not to the Canaanite peoples of the lands who would distract them from worshipping the Lord their God and turn them away to other foreign gods.

After about 10 years, Naomi's sons die too and she is left a widow and alone without family in a foreign land. We don't know why her sons died. The loss of the sons means the loss of the name of Elimelech and the family inheritance in the land of Judah and no one to provide for Naomi. This highlights the plight of a widow at that time and that society: a woman will not survive well without a man to look after her. Naomi realises this and wants to go home, to people of her own culture. Naomi decides to back to Bethlehem: the famine had stopped and food is available, as confirmed by the fact that she arrives at the time of harvest.

Both daughters-in-law offer to go with her but Naomi rejects their support and tells them to go back to their families. Naomi genuinely thinks they will have better lives there than if they stayed with her, as she thinks there is nothing she can do for them. As Naomi sends them away, she blesses her daughters-in-law: *“may the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have been kind to me and may you find new husbands who will be kind to you”*. Orpah goes back to her family but Ruth refuses to go.

Life would indeed be difficult for Naomi without husband and sons, returning from a foreign land with (what she might perceive as the added burden of) a foreign daughter-in-law. Naomi blames it on God. She went out 'full' but the Lord has brought her home empty. She says that the Lord has testified against her and afflicted her.

## Is God to blame?

But is she right in saying that it is God who has afflicted her? In our emotions we want to blame someone and not look at ourselves, our attitudes and our own actions, but often these have contributed far more to our situation than we want to admit. We are no different from Naomi.

- Sometimes bad things happen because we live in a fallen world.
- But did the decisions by Elimelech and Naomi also contribute to her plight? And was it really true that she went out 'full'? They had gone to Moab because of famine and perhaps because they didn't believe that God would provide for them.

- While living in Moab, do they now have divided loyalties between the faith of their people and that of those around them? How influenced are they by the Moabite culture and the worship of foreign idols? How comfortable had they become after 10 years? We also live in a foreign and hostile land: this world is not our home, so we mustn't get too comfortable.
- Sons had married Moabite women, contrary to God's command.
- Elimelech's (*my God is King*) was from Bethlehem (*the House of Bread*). Should they have stayed, trusting in God's provision even at the time of famine? If they had, would God have provided for them and perhaps blessed them with even more because of their faith in Him? In Ruth 2 it says that Boaz (their kinsman) was a man of great wealth: was this because he was a good farmer and businessman, or because he had stayed and showed his trust in the Lord at that time of famine and God had blessed him with abundance?
- Naomi rejected the help and support from her daughters-in-law, probably the people who knew her best and wanted to support her at that time.

It is easy to blame God in difficult times but we also need to look at our own actions and learn from them.

In Judges 3:4 such times of trial would be used to test the faith and character of the Israelites.

*<sup>4</sup>[The nations] were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.*

This is echoed in **James 1: 2-4 (ESV)**:

*<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let that steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

God uses difficult circumstances to show us His faithfulness to us, but also so that we learn to overcome, so that we might grow and trust Him more.

### **How does the Lord get involved in this situation?**

On one level, God has already intervened by setting up the system of Kinsman-Redeemers, which is God's social security system. The Israelites were given a portion of land which would be passed down through the families. In Genesis 38 if a man died leaving a childless widow, it was the duty of a close relative (kinsman-redeemer), to marry his brother's widow to provide children who will inherit the dead man's portion. This was so the inheritance or portion of land would not go out of the family and to provide for the widow. In addition in Leviticus 25, if a relative runs into debt, a kinsman-redeemer would help them, often by buying the inheritance or land of that man, to keep it in the family and provide for the family. All would be restored in the year of Jubilee (every 50 years).

There is very little indication in the text about how Naomi interacts with the Lord in this situation. Yet we can see God's hand at work in the different circumstances and people who are brought alongside Naomi, primarily through Ruth and Boaz, members of her own family.

Ruth must have been told something of the Lord through Naomi and her family and their faith in Him. The initial and key event is Ruth's declaration in Ruth 1: 16,17: "where you go, I will go... your God will be my God. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me." This is a picture of salvation for Ruth, as a gentile woman (a type of the church), but is also a commitment by Ruth to Naomi: in v14 it says she 'clung' to Naomi and the word used is to cleave, the same word used for marriage in Genesis 2:24, indicating a close relationship that will not be broken. Ruth will be by Naomi's side whatever happens and Naomi is not as alone as she thinks. It also gives Naomi a focus, someone else for her to care for, which can be so important to give us perspective in our troubles. We see this as Naomi advises Ruth in Ruth 2 & 3.

In Ruth 2, we see that Ruth is faithful and hard-working. She 'happens' to glean in the fields owned by Boaz to provide food for both of them. God's hand is at work as she could have gone anywhere to glean. Ruth is a huge support to Naomi, something that was noticed by those around them. Boaz meets Ruth and says he has heard of all the things that Ruth has done for Naomi since the death of her husband. Boaz says he will protect Ruth if she gleans in his fields. He tells her not to glean anywhere else, where, as a widow and a foreigner, she might be open to more unwelcome attentions. Through this time of harvest Boaz and Ruth get to know each other's characters. In Ruth 2:20, Naomi reveals that Boaz is a close relative of Elimelech, a potential kinsman-redeemer, and she blesses the Lord that He has remembered her.

Boaz qualifies on both counts: he can 'redeem' or buy Elimelech's inheritance or land to provide for Naomi, and he can marry Ruth as a widowed relative. Therefore Elimelech's land would remain in the family and his name would be continued and Ruth would have a husband and probably children. This is how we see God's hand at work in Naomi and Ruth's lives.

In chapter 3, Naomi tells Ruth to indicate to Boaz that they need him to exercise the right of kinsmen-redeemer. It is hard to understand the cultural context of Ruth 3 and not overlay it with our own culture, so that it becomes a Hallmark love story or give it inappropriate sexual overtones. Ruth submits to Boaz and lies down at his feet, as by that time she knew he was an honourable man. Boaz knows that Ruth is hard-working and a virtuous woman. He also knows there is a closer relative who should be the kinsman-redeemer. But Boaz says he will perform the task if the closer relative doesn't. Ruth returns home and Naomi tells her to be patient until Boaz has sorted it out.

In chapter 4, Boaz sorts out the business at the city gate among witnesses. The closer relative wants the land but not Ruth, but as they come as a package, he refuses to redeem them. Boaz redeems the land for Naomi and Ruth and he and Ruth get married. Ruth bears a son, which although is Boaz's son and part of Boaz's genealogy, is also to have the place of Elimelech and his house, hence a son is born to Naomi. Naomi becomes his nurse and we see her holding him in her lap. We don't see Naomi's response to her change in circumstances: instead it is the women of Bethlehem who tell Naomi how God has blessed her, a reversal of the previous time where Naomi tells the women of Bethlehem how God has abandoned her. God has restored many things to Naomi: a home among her people, a family and a son through Boaz and Ruth. Naomi can (and should) truly rejoice in the changes that the Lord has brought and praise Him for Ruth's son.

What Naomi didn't know is that that son would be an ancestor of David, the greatest Israelite king, and also an ancestor of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. God has given more than just restoring what had been lost by Naomi. His actions have eternal significance.

### **How did God see Naomi?**

God sees Naomi as a woman in difficulties, partly of her own making. I think that God looks on us in a very similar way: at times we have all been in difficulties, and (probably) partly of our own making. This is not throwing stones at anyone: we are sinners, therefore we sin and things go wrong.

God knows Naomi's heart and her frailties, as he does ours too. He hears what she says to the people of Bethlehem when she returns. God is merciful to Naomi; He has compassion on her and brings people alongside her to help. He brings Ruth, who is 'better to Naomi than seven sons', to replace the husband and two sons she has lost. Ruth clings to Naomi and commits herself wholeheartedly to Naomi and the Lord. Then God brings Boaz alongside Ruth. Through them, God restores to Naomi: a man and a wider family to care for her and a 'grandson' for her to care for.

## **Importance of family**

Ps 68: 5&6: <sup>5</sup>*A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, Is God in His holy habitation.*  
<sup>6</sup>*God sets the solitary in families; He brings out those who are bound into prosperity; But the rebellious dwell in a dry land.*

Family is a place where we can belong: to know and be known. In the church, we can give spiritual input into our brothers and sisters in Christ; we can have spiritual sons and daughters (see example of Paul and Timothy). In times of trouble, God uses His family to help us and brings people alongside us for support.

A challenge to all of us: to whom can I be family? Who can I invite into my family?

## **How does this apply to us?**

- What are the parallels in this story that apply in our lives?
- How often have we not trusted God to provide for us and protect us?
- How have we seen God at work turning around what appeared to be difficult or impossible situations in our lives?
- Have we stopped to give Him thanks and praise for that?
- How have we grown in our faith through difficult times?