

## HUNGERING FOR THE GOD OF THE WORD

Ruth 1:19-2:1

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Have you ever heard the adage, “Some people eat to live, while others live to eat?” It is a statement that describes two extremes of a spectrum. The people who lean more toward the eating to live end of the spectrum fall into two groups: one is starving and can only think about their need to find food. The second are those busy people with places to go, things to do, and people to see. These see having to stop to eat a meal as being an interruption to fulfilling their plans. Thus, they wolf down their food so as to get moving on to their next objective. I must confess that in my past, I have been known to be that kind of person.

But more recently, I have moved a little more toward the other end of the spectrum with people who live to eat, who take their time savoring the flavors of different foods and enjoying the company of others as they share in a good meal.

In a similar vein, people can approach the reading of Scripture from two ends of a spectrum. Some read to get to the point. They are the ones who say, “Show me the details. Give me the outline of the book. Tell me what it really means. How does this truth fit into one of my theological boxes?” In their hurry to grasp the point, they often miss the flavor and subtleties that come with taking time to fellowship with God over His Word. Others ponder, meditate, and savor what the Spirit of God has prepared in each sentence of Scripture, because they hunger to know and draw more closely to the Author of God’s Word.

As we continue with our study of this wonderful little book of **Ruth**, we are deliberately taking it slow in order to appreciate and savor the same spiritual experiences of life that the individuals in the text experienced, and to take in the spiritual nutrition and lessons they learned from God during their lives. If we were to fly too quickly through the book, we would miss the many personal applications that the Spirit of God has for us to enjoy and apply to our lives, so that we might get the most of life this side of heaven.

As we take our time looking at **Ruth**, we will try to highlight the work of God in people's lives. In so doing, we will see over and over that our God is the One who turns what may feel like a curse-driven life into one of eternal blessing. In addition, we will answer the question, "What is another proper action step we can take when we find ourselves in a world of hurt (suffering great loss, enduring personal injustice, or surviving the shame of personal failure)?"

This morning, we will read all of **Ruth 1**, the first Act that deals with a crisis in one family brought on by famine. We will finish our reading with **2:1**, which together with **1:22** functions as a hinge, tying together what took place in Act 1, or **chapter one**, and what follows in Act 2, or **chapter 2**. Next week, we will pick up the plot in **chapter 2**.

After reading the passage, we will complete our study of **1:19-22**, and then we will back up and look closely at three key terms. We will finish our study of God's Word this morning by answering the questions: "Why has God brought us to this study this morning? What difference does He expect it to make in our lives?"

So, follow along in your Bibles as we begin our reading at **Ruth 1:1**. As I read, you will notice that at times I will read the appropriate name of the person to whom a pronoun refers, so that we can better retain the storyline as we read through this section.

**<sup>1</sup>Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with 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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there.**

**<sup>3</sup>Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. <sup>5</sup>Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman [Naomi] was bereft of her two children and her husband.**

**<sup>6</sup>Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return [to Judah] from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food. <sup>7</sup>So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.**

**<sup>8</sup>And 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>May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each 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, but we will surely return with you to your people.”**

**<sup>11</sup>But Naomi said, “Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?**

**<sup>12</sup>Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, <sup>13</sup>would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.”**

**<sup>14</sup>And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup>Then she [Naomi] said [to Ruth], “Behold your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.**

**<sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back 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 I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.”**

**<sup>18</sup>When she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.**

Up to this point, we have read what we have already studied. From here, we begin our study for today.

**<sup>19</sup>So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” <sup>20</sup>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 out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?”**

**<sup>22</sup>So Naomi returned with Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. <sup>1</sup>Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.**

Notice in **verse 19** the phrase, “**all the city was stirred.**” In this context, the word “**stirred**” describes the town’s reaction to their first visual sighting of Naomi and this foreign, non-Hebrew, Moabite woman. It has been suggested by one Hebrew scholar that the word “**stirred**” would be better understood as the village hummed or buzzed with much verbal commotion. Why was there so much buzzing taking place? The people were stunned by what they saw! Their surprise and incredulity was probably based on two things: First, her

appearance. The years of grief and deprivation had surely taken their toll on Naomi's physical appearance. This one who had left Bethlehem as Naomi, the "pleasant one," a robust woman in her prime, now looked a haggard and destitute old woman.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the townsfolk, the women in particular, were probably stirred because they noticed who wasn't and who was with her, raising more questions in their minds. "Where is her husband? Where are her sons? And who is this foreign woman with her who looks like a Moabite?"

Having been greeted with the buzz, Naomi gave public vent to her years of frustration and pain. Hearing her name, which meant "pleasant," "delightful," or even "happy," could only be heard through her ears as stinging irony. Hence, she demanded a new name, "**Mara**," or "bitter," a name that expressed the humiliating shame of her story.

Naomi's declaration in **verses 20-21** involved four accusations leveled against God. She accused God of having "**dealt bitterly**" against her, that He had brought her back "**empty**." When Naomi left her village of Bethlehem fifteen years earlier, she had a secure future in her husband and two sons. But now she had neither. She was destitute and hopelessly vulnerable, a woman to be pitied.

Hence, Naomi continued her rant against God saying that Yahweh had "**witnessed against**" her, or put her on display as to what one should not become as an Israelite. Finally, she declared that Yahweh had "**afflicted**" her or brought down a judgment of humiliation and shame against her, for which she had no hope of ever recovering.

After hearing Naomi's vent, her emotional outcry that, "God is against me!" I'm sure that the crowd's stir meter moved up a few more notches.

Naomi's bitter outburst in **verses 20-21** stands in overwhelming contrast to Ruth's eloquent pledge of commitment to Naomi and Naomi's God Yahweh in **verses 16-18**. Viewed side by side, there is no doubt that the young foreign

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<sup>1</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 645). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

woman cuts a more impressively noble figure than Naomi. With this obvious contrast, the reader is drawn to the righteous character of Ruth, the Moabite daughter-in-law, from here on out. But in the end Naomi, although overshadowed, is not forgotten. She eventually came around to see the hand of Yahweh on her life. Indeed, this sovereign God never abandoned her and He used her hardships to produce a greater good.

With this final outburst by Naomi, the curtain falls on Act 1. The narrative leaves the reader with ambivalent feelings toward Naomi.<sup>2</sup> Naomi may have come back home in faith, but hers was a flawed faith.<sup>3</sup> She did indeed ascribe sovereignty to God, but His sovereignty as portrayed by Naomi was without grace. He was viewed by her as an omnipotent power without compassion, a judicial will without mercy.<sup>4</sup> If a street reporter had come up to interview Naomi at this moment and asked her about God, her answer would have been, “He certainly doesn’t care about me.”

At this point, I would like us to pause in our study to give an application step to those who are hurting and to those who have been called to bring comfort to them. To do so, I would like us to turn to another passage of Scripture to illustrate this point. Please look with me at a psalm of David, **Psalm 139**.

I have found that many who love this passage do not realize what brought about David’s writing of the psalm. The heart of the matter, the occasion of its writing, is found down in the body of the psalm, in **verses 19-22**. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this one, the first eighteen verses are uplifting words of praise, focusing upon David’s God who created him and Who knows him better than David even knows himself. It is a psalm that declares that God is good and moves in our lives for what’s best for us.

But then, suddenly we come to **verses 19-22**, where the tone and content seem, at first, to be totally out of place. However, this is the very reason for

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<sup>2</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 647). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 647). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 647). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

which David has come before God in an attitude of praise and prayer. Look at these verses with me. They read, **“O that You would slay the wicked, O God. Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed. <sup>20</sup>For they speak against You wickedly, and your enemies take Your name in vain.”** David was very upset that wicked evil men, most likely fellow Israelites who have rebelled against God and turned their backs on Him, are against the anointed king of Israel, David, and are out to kill him. Hence, he spoke honestly to God, hiding none of his feelings, **“<sup>21</sup>Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD? And do I not loath those who rise up against You? <sup>22</sup>I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies.”** David wanted to be rid of these mockers of Yahweh, so he asked God to strike them dead or allow him to kill them.

But then, in the very next verses, David revealed his personal issue. David has had a brief history of wanting to kill people too hastily, and knowing this, he didn't want to make a mistake. So He asked God for direction. He cried out, **“<sup>23</sup>Search me, O God, and know my heart.”** This is a Hebraism for. “Show me my heart God. Are my motives pure?” **“Try me and know my anxious thoughts; <sup>24</sup>and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.”**

In stressful times, times of hurt and frustration, of suffering injustice at the hands of others, we can often wrongfully strike back. David knew this about himself and was asking God to help him not to do so again, but instead to operate in the **“everlasting way,”** the way of the eternally righteous God. He knew he was God's man for the moment and didn't want to make a mistake.

So what do we learn from David's example about dealing with our hurts? We see that, whether it is our hurt or we are helping another deal with their hurt, the first action step we need to take is to take a time out or stop to think and answer the question, “Who is God in light of this situation?” Or to put it another way, step back for a moment and take time to remember who God is in light of your problems.

In Naomi's case, in the midst of her pain, she either forgot something about Who God is, or she never knew these things about God. For instance, she may have known that there is no one or god more powerful than Yahweh, but she may have forgotten that in God's righteousness and holiness, there is no

evil or injustice. And therefore, He never does wrong, never is unfair, and always works toward the best means to bring Himself glory and do what is best for the individual in the long run. In her pain, Naomi was lost to her own thoughts and emotions with no one to help her see that God is faithful and never abandons those who seek Him. God is immutable; He never changes. He is not just and kind in one moment and unjust or evilly tortuous the next. He is never totally in control one moment and then impotent the next.

As God did with David when he emotionally burst out and vented, so God allowed Naomi her accusatory outburst. We too should give room for those who find themselves suddenly between a rock and a hard place time to vent. Don't feel like you have to protect God's honor from being slammed. God is quite capable of protecting his own name and purposes. Don't feel pressured to correct their theology right at that moment. God did not do that with Naomi. He wisely revealed the truth about Himself to her when she was ready to learn and in a fashion that she couldn't miss. He didn't thump her over the head at the very moment of her failure, but waited and at the right time showed her His hand in it all. We will see this as we continue through **Ruth**. Likewise, we should be wise in our timing in helping someone stop and consider what is true about God and what is not.

A second action step for helping those who are hurting is the challenge to search their own heart for any errors that need to be corrected. When they do this, if they sense they are guilty for a wrong attitude or action, or if they are reacting due to personal feelings of shame for words spoken or actions taken, then have them seek God's forgiveness.

Finally, have them bring their petition to God and wait for His answer. In other words, if they are guilty for bringing upon themselves some of the stress they are under, encourage the person to ask God to forgive them, and to receive His forgiveness. If they are not guilty of doing wrong, but want His direction for something, then have them ask God for what they need and be prepared to wait for God to direct them.

At this time, I want to direct your attention to three key terms that are brought up in the first Act of the book of **Ruth** and are referred to throughout the story. The multiple uses of these words are meant to point the reader to key themes in the book.

The first key word we mentioned a couple weeks ago, and it is found in **verse 8**. It is the word “**kindly**” in English, “**hesed**” in Hebrew. There is no one English word equal to the Hebrew word “**hesed**.” The best and shortest English expression one can come up with to describe this Hebrew word is the loving kindness of God. It is God’s manner of dealing with people, especially those who are undeserving, which is all of us. He never abandons His chosen people. He never turns his back on them. They may be called to endure harsh times in this fallen world, but that is not a sign that He has rejected them or that He has ceased to be lovingly kind. God’s “hesed” is seen in His loving faithfulness, His continually reaching out to those whom He has chosen, even though they may have just failed miserably again.

Throughout the book of **Ruth**, flows this theme of God’s lovingkindness toward both Naomi and Ruth and eventually to the nation of Israel, the first targeted readers of the book.

A second key term is used twelve times between **verse 6** and **18**. It is the word “**return**.” It marks the beginning and the end of Act 1. It serves as a writer’s signal of the direction for the rest of the plot of the entire book. This book is all about the need for returnings.

There is Naomi’s geographical return from Moab to Israel.

And there is this Hebrew widow’s (and bereft mother of two dead sons) emotional return from her bitterness toward God to a recognition of God’s redeeming love at work in her life, causing her to rejoice from the depth of her soul.

This rejoicing will signal Naomi’s spiritual return to trusting fully in Yahweh.

In addition, we discover that the land of Israel has had a return from being drought-torn to the fertility of bountiful crop production. Once again a harvest of grain was so great that word spread for miles around. This obviously brought a return of hope and life to the village of Bethlehem.

And finally, by the end of the book, we have the return of fertility to the

family of Naomi with the eventual birth of her grandson, Obed.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, this term “**return**,” used twelve times and several times in the passage we read today, is significant. It reminds us that regardless of the present state of our lives, our country, or our family relationships, we can believe that as we continue to turn to, return to the Lord, honor Him with our best, and make Him number one in our lives, life itself will be returned to us, even in the midst of our darkest hour.

To put this in the form of a principle, I would say: Regardless of the state we are in, God is in the business of returning to a person’s life blessing out of what was thought to be an eternal curse.

The last of the three key terms from our passage for this morning is probably the most thought of key term by those familiar with the book of **Ruth**. It is the expression “**kinsman redeemer**.” To be more accurate, this expression is not one term, but two different words used in reference to the same person. The “**kinsman**” refers to a relative of the family. The idea behind “**redeem**” is to exchange for or buy back something for positive good. The “**kinsman redeemer**” was one who could rescue a family relative in time of need.

In our story, these two terms are used separately and together many times. The first time “**kinsman**” is used is in **2:1**. The first time “**redeemer**” is used is in **3:13**. Together these terms are used sixteen times in the remaining three chapters. The multiple uses of the two terms drives home the theme of a sacrificial love that moves someone to retrieve something, oftentimes at a very high personal and sacrificial price.

In this story, these words point to three actions of redeeming love. The first is obvious. It refers specifically to the redeeming love of a man for a distant relative and another woman--Boaz and his role as the “**kinsmen redeemer**” who rescues Ruth and his distant relative, Naomi.

Secondly, this is also a story about the redeeming love of a daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabitess for her mother-in-law, Naomi. As her actions will reveal,

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<sup>5</sup> Roop, E. F. (2002). *Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (p. 35). Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

Ruth resolves to fulfill her oath to Naomi and do whatever is necessary to protect and provide for her.

But the most important act of redeeming love is the truth that is subtly woven throughout the backdrop of this story. That is the story of the redeeming love of God for His chosen people Israel and for those Gentiles who choose to worship Yahweh.

The first targeted readers of **Ruth**, the Israelites, would find this book extremely hopeful after their horrible rebellion against God and their worship of foreign gods for more than four hundred years. But we readers today also see revealed a seed of hope for non-Jews, for it is through Ruth that we have baby Jesus, our Messiah, Savior, rescuer, forgiver of our sins, and transformer of lives. He is the One we celebrate this season as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. He is the ultimate redeemer! Do you know Him?

**Proverbs 3:5-6:** Trust in Jesus with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. Choose to make Him the boss of your life and He will direct your course to a safe place with peace.

