

## RELIEF IN DARKEST HOUR OF THE SOUL

Ruth 1:6-10

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In 2013, I found myself in one of the deepest darkest soulish valleys of my life. Looking back, I now see that I didn't suddenly arrive there, but had been slowly entering downward into that valley for a couple of years.

All the while, I continued with my spiritual disciplines of meeting with God early in the morning, praying, reading his Word, and journaling, but even with that, I slowly came to feel like I was walking alone. Truth be told, I was never alone, but I felt like it. During that time, a friend who was walking beside me introduced me to a song artist, whose music God would use to meet me in that valley. Her words of reality helped me to see I was not alone. God would use the words of her music to draw me closer to Him and see that He had never left me and that He would lead me safely through and out of that valley.

I'd like for you to listen to one of her songs, for I sense that today, many of you here will relate to the words. Her name is Ellie Holcomb, and the song is "The Valley."

We are into an unusual season in our fellowship. I won't mention names, but we have men and women, young, old and "older," from junior high to seniors who are working through various serious issues and heartaches. Some of you are facing your own dark valley. Many of you are in need of God's encouragement, because these various challenges sometimes make it difficult to see the goodness of God in it all.

I have met a few adults who adamantly refuse to admit to ever having had such an experience, and to them I say, "May God continue to bless you." But really, I wonder if they are telling themselves the truth or if they are running from reality or being Pollyannaish with the "Glad Game." I'm all for looking for God's blessings in the storm clouds, but sometimes you can look and look, but it is just hard to find them.

So, in those dark seasons, how does God often choose to reveal His goodness to those who, for lack of a better description, feel spiritually numb? One way God breaks through is illustrated in our text this morning. Our text will remind us that no matter what we have done in the past or how dark our days or future may appear, our God is still moving us toward what is best for us in the end--toward what will bring us the greatest joy and what will bring Him the greatest glory. Regardless of our circumstances, God is continually at work in our lives to not only draw us closer to Himself, but to transform us to be more stable, godly individuals, like Jesus.

We have just begun a new series in the book of **Ruth**. The heroine of the book, the person around whom the book is written, is not Ruth, but a woman named Naomi. In fact, the title of the book, according to several scholars I have read, would make more sense if it were Naomi. But that's a subject for discussion at another time.

The first chapter of **Ruth** begins with Naomi and ends with Naomi. It's an overview of her life up to that point in time. She is portrayed throughout the book as a normal, imperfect woman, struggling through a major crisis in her life. Yet in the midst of her own confusion, God is continually at work, not only drawing her to Himself, but using her to point her daughter-in-law, a Moabite named Ruth, to the one, true, personal and living God, Yahweh.

The book of **Ruth** can be viewed as a four-act play. This morning, we are returning to Act 1, which covers **chapter 1**. In the first scene, **verses 1-5**, the nature of the crisis is highlighted. Last time we learned that our heroine Naomi found herself in a downward spiral-like crisis that began more than ten years earlier. Just when she didn't think things could get worse, they did. It began with a famine in her home town that required the family to seek food elsewhere. Then, while living in a foreign land, her husband died. Ten years later, her two sons died, leaving her with the responsibility of looking after her two daughters-in-law while she was destitute herself.

At present, all three women were without men (providers and protectors) and without the hope of ever having a normal life. As the only one left to lead the household, what was Naomi going to do? How would she respond to this crisis? That's where we pick up the plot this morning.

As we consider our immediate passage beginning with **verse 6**, which carries on down through **verse 18**, we have the three women's responses to the crisis they faced. The conversations that followed demonstrate how tightly related these issues of provision, protection, and hope were for these women and all women of those days. In comparison to the rest of the book, the large amount of space devoted by the writer to describing the response of these women to their predicament emphasizes their depth of despair and hopelessness and confusion.

Beginning with **verse 6**, we see Naomi's decision to leave Moab and to return home to Israel. We read:

**<sup>6</sup>Then [with all that has happened and knowing what she had to look forward to] she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return 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.**

There are four elements in these two verses that combine to paint a picture of divine grace. First, it was a gift from God that in the midst of her grief and pain God enabled Naomi to hear good news that the famine was over back home. She no longer had to remain in a foreign land. Hope arises amidst the depression of life, but Naomi didn't appear to recognize that the good news of the famine's end was an act of God, drawing her back not just to her home, but to Himself. She was spiritually numb.

A second element of God's grace revealed here is that Naomi heard that Yahweh had intervened on behalf of his people. The critical word in this clause is that God had "**visited**" his people. This word "**visited**" bears a wide range of meanings. It occurs most often in military contexts, where it means

“to assemble, count, and muster” men for battle. But it is also commonly used in theological contexts, with God as the subject. In those theological contexts, to “**visit**” means that God “attends to His people.” This kind of attention from God may be either favorable or unfavorable, depending upon the context of the passage. In negative contexts, it denotes “to intervene against or to punish.” In positive contexts, as in our text, the word means “to intervene on behalf of, to come to the aid of.”<sup>1</sup> So here we see God’s grace in Yahweh’s coming to the aid of His people.

The third evidence of God’s favor is mentioned in the words “**His people**,” the nation of Israel. The term expresses the normal covenant relationship between deity and people. The return of the rains signaled that God had not forgotten or rejected His people and that this period of Godly discipline was over, and indeed, God still loved His people.

A fourth evidence of God’s grace is that Yahweh had given his people “**food**.” The literal Hebrew word used there is the word for bread. The author of **Ruth** is making a play on words, because the name of her home village was Bethlehem, or “house of bread.” The writer’s point, which every Hebrew reader would have picked up, is that God had restocked this village with bread.<sup>2</sup>

All of this was true. God had reached out to the people of Israel, but there is a notable absence of any hint of repentance on the part of Israel as a whole and even on Naomi’s part. There is no written evidence that the people recognized the cause that brought about the famine, that is, their having turned their backs on God. Other than the writer’s note, there is no evidence that Naomi or any who were living through that season of relief recognized the goodness of the hand of God in that situation. But with the help of the writer, the reader recognizes the merciful and providential hand of God, once again reaching out to his stubborn, thankless people. Yet, even with their ongoing rebellion, God was still guiding the natural, agricultural, and historical events toward the fulfillment of His purposes, in particular, the setting of the stage for the ultimate emergence of David’s ancestor, the Messiah, Jesus, “**the Bread of life**.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus is the only one who can sustain us.

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<sup>1</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 631). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>2</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 631). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 631). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Often times when we are crippled by grief, buried in confusion, enslaved by second guessing wrong choices, and thus feeling abandoned by God or hopeless that we will ever find a way out of our predicament, it is hard to see God’s signals of grace and love that He has not abandoned us. Such is the case of Naomi. There is no evidence that she saw God’s grace extended to her in the midst of her ordeal. Yet God demonstrated His heart, that, “**While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.**” But in time, God would get through to her. And we will see a hint of that unique instrument God used to eventually turn the light on in Naomi’s darkness of the soul.

According to the text, Naomi’s subsequent preparations for her journey appear quick and silent. There was no big farewell party or loud announcement. This leads me to conclude that even this silent departure of these female refugees reinforces the pain in their story.<sup>4</sup>

Leaving Moab was not an easy decision for Naomi to make, because she knew that when she got home, she would arrive in a state of humiliation and failure, being destitute and at the complete mercy of the community. Whereas when she left maybe fifteen years before, she was young, beautiful, married, and blessed with two sons. But now she would return home an old, widowed, childless beggar. Understanding that, she made another significant decision. Naomi insisted that her daughters-in-law remain in Moab and not follow her to Israel.

Beginning with **verses 8-18**, there are three verbal interchanges between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. We won’t be able to cover all three exchanges this morning, but we will get started on them.

The first exchange is between Naomi on one side, and the other two women on the other, in **verses 8-9**. We read:

**<sup>8</sup>And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, and return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you as**

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<sup>4</sup> Roop, E. F. (2002). *Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (p. 36). Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

**you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup>May the LORD grant that you find rest, each in the house of her husband.” Then she kissed them and they lifted up their voices and wept.**

Having come to Moab as an alien herself, Naomi undoubtedly recognized from the outset the problems her daughters-in-law would face if they moved back with her to Bethlehem. They would be cut off from their family and live as destitute aliens in a foreign land, with a widow who had nothing to promise them. So, intending to spare them the potential of more grief, Naomi, at some point along the way, finally broke the silence. In her first speech, she offered a beautiful illustration of tough love, combining firmness with tenderness.

Conveying a sense of urgency, she began with a double command, “**Go**” and “**Return**.” Since they were well on their way to Judah, Naomi specifically encouraged these young women to return to their personal histories and go back home to their mothers.

The firmness of Naomi’s double command to Orpah and Ruth to return to their mothers’ homes is matched by the tenderness she showed them, which is expressed in her double blessing.

This double blessing is remarkable for three reasons. First, when she addressed her Moabite daughters-in-law, she invoked the name of Yahweh, apparently assuming that the authority and the grace of the God of Israel extended beyond Israel’s borders into the foreign territory of the pagan god, Chemosh.

On the surface the prayer appears to express deep faith in Yahweh. But if the reader continues, he will soon realize that at this point in Naomi’s life, she believed somewhat in Yahweh being the most powerful God in the world, but her own bitterness about her cruel circumstances had raised questions in her mind about God’s loving concern and care of her. It’s the idea that, “Girls, God loves you, but considering my present situation, He really can’t love me.”

Something else that is remarkable about Naomi’s blessing is that she used two significant Hebrew terms to identify both blessings. The first is the unique

term “**kindly.**” She began by praying that Yahweh would demonstrate the same kindness toward them that they had demonstrated toward Naomi.

Up until this point in time and in Scripture, this term for kindness was not used of anyone else other than another Israelite. It is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which cannot be translated by just one English word. It is a covenantal term, used only between God and His chosen people. In this one term is wrapped up all of the tender attributes of God: His love, covenant faithfulness (reliability that He will never break His promises to Israel), mercy, grace, kindness, and loyalty. In short, it refers to God’s acts of devotion and lovingkindness that go beyond the requirements of duty. These would be acts of God toward people who have broken their agreements with Him, and thus He should no longer be required to treat them this way at all. Again, it’s the idea of, “**While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.**” Christ was not obligated to die for us. There is not one obligation that God must save one sinner. But because of His *hesed*, He chooses to save many.

By using this term, the writer is telling the Hebrew reader that Naomi, even if it is only for a brief second, was seeing God’s kindness toward her through the loyalty and manner in which these young women had treated her. But as she thought of these girls, the idea of God’s kindness toward her evaporates from her mind as quickly as a burst soap bubble.

The second significant term she used in her double blessing of these two women is the word “**rest**” in **verse 9**. The idea behind this term is that one feels so protected and provided for, that rest and relaxation is possible, knowing there is security in the husband God provided. Remember, right then those two middle-aged widows were vulnerable, having no husband to provide for or protect them.

Different than our world, these women could not just go out and find a job. If they returned with Naomi to Israel, what Israeli male would marry a Moabite woman? People from Moab were looked down upon. Most likely, these two young widows would be doomed to remain unmarried, left to merely survive in a foreign land, with no purpose. But Naomi was trying to convince them that they would have a much better chance to remarry if they stayed with their own people than to return with her as aliens.

This was a hard thing for Naomi to suggest, because she knew that when she left Moab and her daughters-in-law, they would have no more ties together. She loved these girls. She had lived with and known them for more than ten years! They helped her bury her husband. They stood by her for ten years. And when their husbands, her sons, died, she stood with them as they buried their beloveds together. These women were close. And now, she was suggesting that they split up and never see one another again. It was not an easy instruction for Naomi to make, but nonetheless, she advised them to return to their homes and to find new husbands.<sup>5</sup>

Keep in mind, Naomi was wishing for something for these two women that she herself had no hope of ever receiving but desperately needed. For her at this point, God had forsaken her and her life was over. Naomi prayed that God would provide her two daughters-in-law with all that she herself had lost.

A third reason that Naomi's double blessing of her daughters is remarkable is that she recognized their honorable care and treatment of her as a widow, and their assistance in burying her husband as well as her two sons. They had treated her with Yahweh-like *hesed*, kindness. They were models of grace to this foreign woman. "Inasmuch as you have shown kindness to the least of these Israelites, so may Yahweh show kindness to you."<sup>6</sup>

At the end of **verse 9**, Naomi's kiss and tears were intended to close this tender farewell moment.<sup>7</sup> But they didn't. The moment was explosive with pathos, so as soon as all three women vented their emotions together with loud cries, wailing, and tears, her daughters-in-law spoke up and refused to accept her decision to part ways with them. We read, "**And they said to her, 'No, but we will surely return with you to your people.'**" They were not that easily persuaded, which says a lot about their deep love and respect for Naomi. It also says a lot about Naomi's character as a woman and mother-in-law.

On the contrary, these daughters-in-law declared their determination to return with Naomi to her people. The statement is truly remarkable, for it demonstrates that after all the grief these two young women had shared with

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<sup>5</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 634). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>6</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 633–634). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> Roop, E. F. (2002). *Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (p. 36). Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

their mother-in-law, they were more attached to her than to their own country, community and even blood relatives. They would not return to their own their mothers' houses.<sup>8</sup>

As I ponder these verses, much comes to mind by way of application, but I leave you with this one. It has to do with the observation of how God often works to break through to us in our dark hours. Sometimes in the midst of the darkness of the soul, by ourselves, we are slow to recognize God's amazing grace in our lives, as Naomi, even though God had showered his *hesed* upon her through the kindness and honoring of her daughters-in-law. It's at those times that God often uses others to manifest His *hesed* toward us. Others' acts of kindness, words of encouragement, letters in the mail, visits, meals, and gifts point us toward spiritual life.

To me in 2013, God sent several opportunities to experience his *hesed*; but at the moment, I was blinded by my emotional pain from seeing them as being gifts from him. Later, however, I saw his finger prints all over them. One in particular was my Timothy friend Victor's gift of Ellie Holcomb's first album. The words and truths of scripture that came forth from that album were like a fountain of water to a thirsty soul. In the midst of the darkness of the soul, the character of Christ, His *hesed*, often bursts forth in the kindness of others.

Today in this room and in the many arenas of influence in which God has placed you, there are others in need of emotional, financial, and spiritual evidence of God's *hesed*. Has God called you to be the person who brings that to them?

At the moment, if you are not experiencing a season of darkness of the soul, you can be God's effective instrument of encouragement to others. If you would like to do so, check with our Lead Deacon over our Care ministry, Sue Russell. Men, we need you to be available to reach out for maybe one hour a week, to hang out with another man who may need to experience God's *hesed* through you. If you would like to know who could use some encouragement, check with our Deacon of Visitation, Donna Hegben. Go visit, sit, listen or pray. Men, it's not always appropriate for women to call on men. Another area is sending out cards to people. Right now, Woody Woodward has

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<sup>8</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 634–635). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

suffered a major stroke while visiting back east and is in a rehab center waiting to come home. Cards and eventually some visits would do a lot for him. Ladies, many of you are involved in this already, but we could always use more help.

Another area of care is through the meals ministry. If you like to cook, make cupcakes, soups, or anything nourishing, check with Lynn Kellenbeck to get the details.

God has called us to be ambassadors of Christ, to come alongside those who are presently in the dark valley. Let's ask God to open our eyes to opportunities of ministry in Jesus name.