

Ruthless

It wasn't long ago, as I gazed at the countryside once considered lovely, it now looked forsaken. The trees seemed tortured and tired; the colors of flowers were no longer attractive. All of creation seemed to illustrate vanity and futility and I knew it was all just a reflection of my own soul.

In such a place, why hang on? Why hold on to a hope that seems as vaporous as human life? Why go on when bitterness of grief makes all seem like ashes?

I can relate to Naomi.

Perhaps, you know her story (see the book of Ruth). Elimelech, her husband brought the family from Bethlehem to Moab in search of sustenance. Famine was the motivation – ironic because Bethlehem means “house of bread.”

It wasn't long before Elimelech died. His name means “God is my King” and it's significant that he died when he left the “house of bread” and went back across the Jordan, leaving the land of promise and coming to Moab – a place where only a generation earlier the Israelites had brought a catastrophic judgment upon themselves by engaging in sexual sin with the local women. And yet a local woman is what God had in mind.

Naomi's two sons might have been sickly for their names mean “sickly” and “pining.” Whatever the case may be, they took wives of the Moabite women and within ten years both sons were dead. Naomi was left destitute – no husband, no children, nothing to show and only

one place to go – back home. What a journey that must have been!

Physically, it was an uphill climb, but inwardly it was probably more like scaling Mt. Everest. In her misery, she sent her two daughter-in-laws home to their families. One departed but the other, Ruth, stayed on. This young woman's devotion was clearly supernatural and many, many fine sermons have focused upon her famous reply,

*“Entreat me not to leave you,
Or to turn back from following
after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will
lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.
Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The LORD do so to me, and
more also,
If anything but death parts you
and me.”*

Herein, however, let's consider Naomi. Sure, she had family land back in Bethlehem, but who would work it? Sure, she had some extended family there but she was bitter in heart and frankly families are sometimes incapable of filling such voids.

I can conceive of only one reason Naomi would return to Bethlehem, hope in God. Back then, even more than today, a woman's life-purpose was wrapped up in her children. Without children, without a husband and with only a Moabitish widow as her companion, what other hope could she have? Even if she dealt with her nihilistic grief, how could she survive? There was no social security. ‘She could beg, but that

would surely disgrace her relatives. She was too old to sell herself into service or prostitution.’ This was a hostile world to an old childless widow.

But she and Ruth made the crossing of the Jordan – it didn't part for them – and made the climb back to Bethlehem. Clearly, she held on to the unseen, the illogical, the unexplainable. Leaving the pastures of Moab behind, trudging up what must have seemed like an exhausting path, she felt, I'm sure, judged, crushed and forsaken by God. ‘After all, they had gone to Moab; they had left the land of Promise; they'd allowed their sons to marry the ‘accursed women’; they'd done so much wrong, right? Perhaps she was just a ‘statistic’ like those of a couple of generations ago who died in the desert wilderness. Maybe they had angered God and this situation was the result. That was the sensible explanation.’

Yet, inexplicably, she held on while an invisible hand held hers and led her on back home.

These are the times when you can't see the horizon let alone a grand and glorious plan. If an angel from heaven had appeared before her, she might have missed him and so God had an angel, of sorts, walking with her.

You see, it was all about Ruth – this tender woman encouraging her along the trek. But Naomi had no idea that her tragedy was God's prophetic masterpiece of the ages. She was clueless that Ruth, a woman from that treacherous land of Moab, a woman whose sickly husband God had brought to the grave, that she would be the great

grandmother of Israel's greatest king and a fundamental part of the Messianic line – that she would masterfully picture the grace of God upon the gentile nations during the church age.

Dragging her feet along that dusty path up to Bethlehem, she couldn't see chapter two let alone Revelation 22! She undoubtedly loved her daughter-in-law, but she surely longed for the ‘good ole days’ – way before Ruth, when she was Ruthless so to speak. She had no way of knowing that her life was really all about someone else's – Ruth's. She had no way of knowing that her own tumultuous life would grandly portray the Jewish people in God's perfect plan.

It was all a majestically beautiful painting and Naomi's life was God's canvas – her tears the background paint for the luminous joy that would highlight the breathtaking foreground of God's faithfulness and goodness in His time and way.

It's important for those of us who experience such times to continue in trust when circumstances seem to say God is untrustworthy. When Mary looked up at her divine child so mutilated on that cross as to be unrecognizable, she may have felt as though God was ruthless and untrustworthy. When Job lost all his children in a devastating and supernatural way, he may have pondered the same. Or consider Jacob when he learned that his dearest son Joseph was supposedly torn to shreds and “devoured by an evil beast.”

But in all these cases as well as your own, God is not ruthless but indeed has a ‘Ruth’ there with you –

an extraordinarily beautiful purpose in mind. He says, *"I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."* (Jer 29:11)

It's also important for us who experience such times to continue in hope when history haunts our conscience. Undoubtedly, Naomi regarded her own with bitterness and regret. If anyone could feel like they wasted their life, that all opportunity was gone, it was surely this dear old woman trudging up that path. But through it all, she never lost hope in God. Even when she believed *"the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me"* she also recognized His kindness through Boaz (v2:20).

And you know the story – in the end, her companions, speaking to her while she holds Ruth's little baby Obed, say unto her, *"...may he be to you a restorer of life..."* – certainly a prophetic allusion to Christ as well as the child.

As astounding and unreasonable as it may seem in Moab, Christ will restore life. He came to us serving just as Obed's name means "serving." Have you left the 'house of Bread'? Maybe you thought it was necessary; maybe you were famished. Do you find yourself in 'Moab'? Bereaved? Lonely? Hanging by a thread? Perhaps it's time to get back to 'Bethlehem'. Need a helping hand?

I held my own son's right hand when he died. Since then, I asked the Lord to hold my own and in fact He said, *"For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'"* (Isa

41:13) Returning to the Bethlehem of basic trust is a humbling and dusty road. For you see, as with Naomi, your life and mine are all about someone else – Jesus Christ. But you won't realize His purpose unless you back there. You won't find it in Moab. If Naomi hadn't made that journey back, we'd be looking at a whole different history.

She arrived there at the time of the barley harvest, the end of which is coincident with Pentecost. You remember from the book of Acts that this was the time at which the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and the church was born. Likewise, as you make your way back to the house of bread, you'll find new life and an outpouring of God's Spirit.

Now, when we get to heaven, one person I truly want to meet is Naomi. Maybe you'll see her before me. If so, ask her if she still has any regrets and I'm confident you'll hear her laugh with an understanding joy as radiant as heaven itself. I bet she'll tell you every step along the way, as much as it hurt then, is much more than worth it now. (2 Cor 4:17)

For you see, our God is never 'Ruth-less'.