

I

Virtually everyone appreciates a narrative that ends with a positive, satisfying conclusion. But when that story reflects a divinely inspired Biblical drama that echoes the underlying themes of loss and redemption, it results in a message that transcends cultural and generational boundaries. Such is the case with the book of Ruth, the eighth book of the Bible.

Unlike some other Biblical books, the author of this work remains uncertain. According to ancient Jewish tradition, the prophet Samuel composed the book of Ruth. While that authorship is possible, it seems unlikely for two reasons.

First, the genealogy that concludes this book suggests that someone compiled and recorded these events long after they transpired. Next, [Ruth 4:7](#) mentions a then-contemporary legal practice and refers to it as a “*custom in former times*.” This assumes that the original readers of this book were unfamiliar with that antiquated practice.

Because of this, the book of Ruth likely began as an oral account of actual events. That account then passed from generation to generation until it reached its final written form around the time of King Solomon in the tenth century B.C.

In light of its nature as a historical narrative, the book of Ruth offers multiple layers of interpretation. For example, the book of Ruth portrays the human drama of life and death, as well as the virtues of faith and commitment. In addition to providing historical insight into the cultural practices of its era, it also offers a catalog of errors for attentive readers to avoid in dealing with the challenges of life.

This brief, four-chapter narrative further illustrates how human beings can find a place of significance within the sovereign plan of God, even those who seem to be “outsiders.” Moreover, the book of Ruth displays God’s providential care in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation.

The book of Ruth serves as a prophetically significant book as well. Through it, we learn of Ruth’s place in the lineage of King David, and ultimately, Jesus Himself. Finally, Ruth’s account serves as a powerful illustration of Jesus’ redemption of humanity and His role as the agent of our salvation.

II

The first verse of the book of Ruth begins by establishing the timeframe for the events that follow...

“Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons” (Ruth 1:1). ⁽¹⁾

So, there are no preambles or introductory comments to begin the book of Ruth. Instead, this narrative begins with a time-stamp that establishes a point of reference for ancient and modern readers alike: “*In the days when the judges ruled...*” (ESV).

The Biblical book of Judges chronicles this dark and difficult period for the nation of Israel. It marked an era of moral, ethical, and spiritual anarchy that began around 1400 B.C. and continued for several hundred years. This was a period when the people of Israel fell into recurring cycles of moral indifference, spiritual apathy, and/or idolatry.

These periods of apostasy generally lasted until God focused their attention on their spiritual negligence through a natural calamity (such as the famine we see here in Ruth 1:1) or the aggressive actions of a foreign oppressor. Once the people realized their error in forsaking the God who graciously provided for them, they turned to Him for help once more.

God responded to those pleas by raising up judges to deliver the people from their self-inflicted hardships. Some of the more prominent judges of that period included Gideon ([Judges 6-8](#)), Deborah

([Judges 4-5](#)), and Samson ([Judges 13-16](#)).

Once those judges secured Israel's deliverance, the people typically responded by following God for the remainder of that judge's life. Unfortunately, the people returned to their spiritual indifference following the deaths of each judge, and the cycle began anew.

This led to one of the most regrettable commentaries in all Scripture: "***In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes***" ([Judges 21:25](#)). This verse prepares us for the account that immediately follows the book of Judges: Ruth.

(1) Except as noted, all Scripture references taken from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. All rights reserved.

III

While life's hardships, problems, and difficulties may not result from spiritually related causes, the circumstances detailed here in the opening verse of Ruth certainly did.

A "famine" refers to a prolonged lack of food and water, and it was no mere coincidence that the people of Bethlehem were suffering under those conditions. God had earlier warned His people that the presence of a famine might result from a specific cause.

For instance, the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy listed the physical, political, material, and financial blessings that God offered to provide those who adhered to the terms of the Old Covenant (see [Deuteronomy chapter twenty-eight](#)). However, that chapter also documented the penalties He would inflict upon the people if they chose to abandon Him.

That second list formed a mirror image of the blessings mentioned earlier in Deuteronomy twenty-eight. Two verses within that chapter tell us this...

"The heavens above you will be as unyielding as bronze, and the earth beneath will be as iron. The land will become as dry as dust for lack of rain, and dust storms shall destroy you" (Deuteronomy 28:23-24 TLB).

Thus, it's reasonable to assume that the opening verses of the book of Ruth took place in an era when God was seeking to direct the people's attention to their spiritual negligence by way of this famine. Since God had promised to provide abundantly for those who followed Him, this famine likely indicated that something was spiritually wrong.

So, while the hardships and problems of life may not be spiritually related (as seems to be the case here in the book of Ruth), we would do well to seek God's wisdom for insight into the challenges we face (see [Philippians 4:6-7](#)). The importance of that commitment will become more evident as we progress through Ruth chapter one.

IV

This reference to Bethlehem in the opening verse of Ruth is the source of an underlying irony. Since Bethlehem means "house of bread," the fact that a famine had afflicted this area must have seemed like a cruel mockery to its residents.

In response to those conditions, the family mentioned here in Ruth 1:1 chose to relocate to the land of Moab. Moab was located approximately fifty miles (80 km) east of Bethlehem on the opposite side of the Dead Sea.

The nation of Moab began when two angelic messengers instructed Abraham's nephew Lot to remove his family from the region of Sodom and Gomorrah prior to its destruction ([Genesis 18:16-19:28](#)). Following their departure, Lot and the remaining members of his family found their way to a

mountainous region where they took refuge in a cave.

The Scriptures then reveal how Lot's daughters acted upon the moral values they acquired while living in Sodom...

“Now the firstborn said to the younger, ‘Our father is old, and there is no man on the earth to come in to us as is the custom of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve the lineage of our father.’

So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose” (Genesis 19:31-33).

Genesis 19:37 follows by telling us, *“The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day.”* ⁽¹⁾

The enmity between Moab and Israel later grew to such an extent that Deuteronomy 23:3-4 tells us, *“No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you” (NIV).*

In addition to these things, there were several other historical factors to consider as well.

(1) [Genesis 19:34-38](#) tells us that Lot's younger daughter followed her older sister's example and became the progenitor of the Ammonites, another people group with a long-standing history of antagonism towards the people of Israel.

V

Ruth 1:1 suggests that this family intended to live in Moab for a limited time, perhaps just long enough to wait out the famine and then return home. However, that decision meant relocating to a land with an extensive history of hostility toward the nation of Israel.

For instance, the Old Testament book of Numbers relates the account of a Moabite king named Balak. Balak once enlisted the aid of a magician/prophet named Balaam to curse the people of Israel ([Numbers 22-24](#)).

Another leader of Moab formed a confederation with two other ancient enemies of Israel known as the Ammonites and the Amalekites. That led to a period of subjugation that lasted eighteen years (see [Judges 3:12-14](#)). Later on, Israel's King Saul fought against Moab and several other enemy nations ([1 Samuel 14:47](#)).

In addition to those military hostilities, there were the moral and spiritual customs associated with the Moabites. For example, the Scriptures tell us that the women of Moab enticed the men of Israel to commit idolatry and sexual immorality on at least one occasion (see [Numbers 25:1-9](#)).

Another point of concern involved Moab's religious practices. Moab's leading religious deity was known as Chemosh, a figure that 1 Kings 11:37 identifies as *“...the abomination of Moab.”* [2 Kings 3:26-27](#) suggests that human sacrifices were offered to that pagan deity.

These historic elements and cultural realities seem to have been absent from this family's decision to relocate to Moab.

On the other hand, it's important to acknowledge the brutal reality of this situation. This family was facing death by starvation, and the decision to relocate to Moab may have seemed to be their best opportunity for survival.

Those with a knowledge of Israel's ancient history were also aware that God had earlier instructed the Old Testament patriarch Jacob to move from the land of Canaan to the idolatrous nation of Egypt

([Genesis 46:2-3](#)). Centuries later, Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus received a similar directive ([Matthew 2:13-14](#)).

The realities were poised against one another in this family's decision-making process. The tension between those considerations reminds us that the variables involved in any major decision are seldom definitive on their own. Nevertheless, a far more significant issue had to do with a crucial element that was missing from their decision.

VI

There is a critical factor that is conspicuous by its absence in this family's decision to relocate to Moab. Notice that there is no indication that anyone prayed or sought God's direction in responding to the famine that had ravaged their hometown. A prayerful approach to that problem might have uncovered hidden biases, blind spots, or additional information that might have led to the best decision.

For instance, the decision to abandon Bethlehem for Moab may have been a sensible and Godly course of action. But it might have also represented an effort to flee from a problem while evading God's discipline. ⁽¹⁾ Instead of relying solely on one's own personal assessment, it would have been [far wiser to seek God's direction](#) in seeking to respond to those circumstances.

As we'll see, God will eventually bring something good from that decision. Nevertheless, this passage reminds us that it is unwise to rely solely upon our limited understanding of the circumstances we encounter with no effort to seek God's will. A prayerful decision to seek His guidance in the decisions of life will put us in the best position to address the issues and concerns we encounter.

As the Scriptures remind us in the New Testament book of James, ***"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him"*** ([James 1:5](#)).

(1) Such a decision rarely ends well, as one prominent Old Testament prophet [might readily attest](#).

VII

"The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion — Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there" ([Ruth 1:2](#)).

After establishing the events that frame our narrative, Ruth 1:2 introduces us to the members of the family mentioned here. While each family member will have a part to play within this drama, three of these participants will only have an indirect effect on the events to follow.

The patriarch of this family was a man named Elimelech, a name that means "God is king." He was accompanied by his wife Naomi (whose name means "pleasant" or "lovely") and their sons Mahlon and Chilion who appear to be young teenagers or pre-teens at this time.

Unfortunately, some bad news was about to arrive for this family in the form of an untimely death...

"Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons" ([Ruth 1:3](#)).

The conditions faced by Naomi following the death of her husband were far different from the challenges faced by a typical single mother today. For instance, there were no life insurance, pension, or assistance plans available during that time. If a widow like Naomi had no family members to assist her, the loss of a husband often resulted in the complete loss of financial income and the prospect of living in poverty for the rest of her life.

But Naomi could still rely upon her sons. And in time, she gained two daughters-in-law as well...

"Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years" ([Ruth 1:4](#)).

There is considerable debate among commentators regarding these marriages. The dispute centers on whether it was right for Naomi's sons to enter into marriage relationships with these Moabite women. For example, a person who entered a marriage partnership with a man or woman of Moab entered a relationship with someone who likely had little knowledge (or interest) in the God of Israel.

It also meant embracing a multitude of cultural influences that would surely lead to problems for anyone who truly wished to honor God.

VIII

While the Old Testament law did not specifically prohibit marital relationships between the Israelites and Moabites, those relationships weren't necessarily ideal. As we're reminded in 1 Corinthians 6:12, ***"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful"*** (ESV).

Although Ruth will eventually make an explicit commitment to the God of the Scriptures, it's unclear if she had done so at the time of her marriage to Naomi's son. As for her sister-in-law, Orpah, she will later elect to return to the people of Moab and their gods. For this reason, it's difficult to fully endorse these marital choices. Instead, we might look to the experience of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham and his son Isaac to find a better example.

When Abraham sought to find a marriage partner for Isaac, the Scriptures tell us he called for his chief servant and said, ***"I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living"*** (Genesis 24:3 NIV).

A look at Abraham's experience with the residents of Canaan suggests that their spiritual beliefs fell into two categories. The first comprised those who chose to live as if God did not exist. The second consisted of those who accepted the idea of a "higher power" in varying forms. Of course, this situation was not unique to Abraham's time, for there are many who fall into these categories today.

Or text from Genesis 24:3 shows that Abraham was aware of an important principle that applies to anyone who seeks to honor the God of the Scriptures: *do not get involved in dating or marriage relationships with those who are not serious about following Him.*

Now admittedly, that mandate may sound unnecessarily restrictive. After all, there are many non-Christians who are honorable, ethical, and moral; the same qualities anyone might seek in a potential marriage partner. So why would someone choose to disqualify a potential marriage partner based on his or her spiritual beliefs?

IX

One reason involves the fact that Christian/non-Christian relationships involve two people who are moving in different directions.

It's important to remember that a Christian's ultimate priority involves following Christ. When a Christian becomes involved in a relationship with someone whose preference reflects something else, both partners will experience conflicting priorities. Thus, it's difficult for a couple to stay together when both sides are traveling in different directions.

The Scriptures discuss these realities in the Old and New Testaments. For example, the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy says this...

"When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are about to enter and occupy, he will clear away many nations ahead of you... You must not intermarry with them. Do not let your daughters and sons marry their sons and daughters, for they will lead your children away from me to worship other gods. Then the anger of the Lord will burn against you, and he will quickly destroy you"

(Deuteronomy 7:1, 2-4 NLT).

The New Testament book of 2 Corinthians also tells us...

“Stop forming inappropriate relationships with unbelievers. Can right and wrong be partners? Can light have anything in common with darkness? Can Christ agree with the devil? Can a believer share life with an unbeliever? Can God’s temple contain false gods?

Clearly, we are the temple of the living God. As God said, ‘I will live and walk among them. I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ The Lord says, ‘Get away from unbelievers. Separate yourselves from them. Have nothing to do with anything unclean. Then I will welcome you.’ The Lord Almighty says, ‘I will be your Father, and you will be my sons and daughters’” (2 Corinthians 6:14-17 GW).

Abraham’s determination to find the right marriage partner for his son thus provides us with a good example to follow. Just as Abraham sought to identify a marriage partner for his son from among the members of his extended family ([Genesis 24](#)), so we should also look to our spiritual family (those who are equally serious about following Christ) in our dating and marriage relationships as well.

X

Although Naomi's husband had earlier passed away, she undoubtedly took comfort in the fact that she still had her sons. Unfortunately for Naomi and her daughters-in-law, that situation was about to change...

“Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband” (Ruth 1:5).

Since Mahlon’s name means “sick” and Chilion’s name means “wasting away,” perhaps it's not surprising to find that each of these men suffered an untimely death. Unfortunately, their passing left three widows in Moab. One of these widows was an alien resident (Naomi) and each was childless.

If Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah were facing this situation today, they might have had the option of finding employment to help provide for their needs. Unfortunately, there were few such options available to such women during that era.

In light of this, the future must have seemed very bleak for Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah. But then, a glimmer of hope appeared in the form of some good news from back home...

“Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread” (Ruth 1:6).

Its interesting to note Naomi's location when she heard this news. The phrase “**country of Moab**” may also be translated as “**fields of Moab.**” ⁽¹⁾ So what was Naomi doing in the fields of Moab during that period?

If a widow like Naomi was found in the fields of Moab, it probably meant that she was gleaning food to eat. “Gleaning” was a task that was generally performed by the destitute in the Biblical era. It referred to the act of following a group of laborers as they harvested a field of grain or produce in order to collect anything that was leftover.

The Old Testament law required laborers to leave a portion of each field unharvested and not make a second pass over a previously harvested field. That offered an opportunity for the poor to reap the leftover production for their needs. For example, one portion of the Old Testament Law says this...

“When you are gathering your harvest in the field and leave behind a bundle of grain, don’t go back

and get it. Leave it there for foreigners, orphans, and widows so that the Lord your God can bless everything you do. When you beat your olive trees to knock the olives off, don't beat the trees a second time. Leave what is left for foreigners, orphans, and widows.

When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, don't pick the vines a second time. Leave what is left for foreigners, orphans, and widows. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt; that is why I am commanding you to do this" (Deuteronomy 24:19-22 NCV, see also [Leviticus 19:9-10](#)).

Unfortunately for Naomi and her daughters-in-law, the Moabites had no such restrictions. That undoubtedly made life for these poor, childless widows even more difficult.

(1) As in the [ESV](#) most notably.

XI

"Therefore she went out 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.

And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go, return each to her mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.' So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept" (Ruth 1:7-9).

After learning that God was at work in the land she departed, Naomi elected to return home. In addition to the fact that God had graciously provided for the needs of His people in the land of Judah, Naomi surely remembered the protections afforded to widows there. Those realities likely made her decision to return home much easier.

Nevertheless, we might ask why Naomi initially departed with Ruth and Orpah, only to urge them to return once their journey began. One commentator offers an observation that can help us make sense of this seemingly unusual response...

"The three widows went together on the way back to Judah, but at this point in the narrative, the matter of their going all the way to Bethlehem had not been decided. The widowed wives of her two sons, at this point, were merely extending the ancient oriental courtesy of going part of the way as an escort for their mother-in-law, a custom which ordinarily would have ended at the border of Moab." (1)

Naomi's reluctance to allow her daughters-in-law to continue with her may have also stemmed from her anxiety concerning the welcome she might receive upon her return to Israel. For instance, Naomi was sure to face some uncomfortable questions regarding her sons and their marriages to women who were foreigners to the community of Israel. Those questions might have been easier to address if she had simply returned by herself.

Even though the Law of God commanded the Israelites to treat foreign residents fairly, Naomi's beloved daughters-in-law might also face the potential for discrimination upon their arrival in Israel. Thus, Naomi may have sought to encourage them to assess the prospective cost of their decision to relocate with her.

From a practical standpoint, it also made better sense for Ruth and Orpah to stay in Moab. For instance, Moab was a familiar place with a familiar culture and familiar people. There was no need to journey across a long and potentially dangerous route. Moab also provided a better opportunity for Ruth and Orpah to establish new marriage relationships.

Yet even though it may have been easier for Ruth and Orpah to remain in Moab, Moab was not the place where God was providing for His people. That was something they could only find by returning with Naomi.

So, this directive would effectively uncover their motives for accompanying her. By releasing Ruth and Orpah from any commitment to demonstrate their loyalty, their only remaining motivation would involve a sincere desire to return with her to a place where God was at work.

(1) James Burton Coffman. *Coffman's Commentary on Ruth* <http://www.studydrive.com/bcc/view.cgi?bk=ru&ch=1>

XII

Despite her extended stay within the nation of Moab, the Moabites and their spiritual practices had little apparent influence on Naomi and her belief in the God of Israel. As she expressed her heartfelt desire for success and prosperity for her daughters-in-law, Naomi might have invoked the name of Moabite god Chemosh or another pagan deity. Instead, she expressed her sentiments in the name of the Lord.

This enables us to develop a contemporary application from these verses. While it may be uncommon to hear someone invoke the name of a pagan deity today, it is not unusual to hear similar appeals in the names of fortune, luck, chance, or fate.

For instance, “Good luck” is something people often say before someone undertakes an endeavor. Others may carry a special item that supposedly imparts good fortune or protection from harm. Then there are those who avoid contact with items that are said to bring “bad luck.”

The individuals in these illustrations are not placing their faith in the God of the Scriptures. Instead, they are electing to place their faith in objects that allegedly possess the ability to bring success or favor. Those responses suggest a subtle lack of faith in God’s control over our lives. They also express the belief that He lacks the ability to protect us from things that might cause “bad luck.”

Those who lack a relationship with Christ may seek help from such objects and their alleged ability to offer protection, success, or favor. In Naomi’s era, that typically meant placing one’s faith in a human-crafted object that was said to represent a deity. People routinely trusted in such objects to bring prosperity instead of the God who could actually do so.

Naomi didn’t fall prey to their example, and we would be wise to emulate her response today.

XII

Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah shared an undeniable affection for one another. That much is clear in their emotional reaction to the prospect of being separated. Yet even though Naomi sought prosperity for her daughters-in-law in the name of the Lord, her relationship priorities for them were unmistakably misguided.

The issue is that Naomi also encouraged Ruth and Orpah to return to the pagan gods and idolatrous culture that was native to Moab. In this respect, Naomi is something of a dichotomy. On one hand, she clearly acknowledged the God of Israel as the only true God. On the other hand, she seemed to be primarily interested in seeing her daughters-in-law find new spouses instead of encouraging them to join her in the land where they could become acquainted with that God.

If Ruth and Orpah chose to accompany Naomi to her homeland, they might have asked the God of Israel to establish them in new marriage relationships with men who recognized and followed Him. Unfortunately, Naomi’s suggestion to return to Moab offered a short-term benefit at best. That did not address the long-term issue of their estrangement from God. That was something they were only likely to find by returning with Naomi to Bethlehem.

So while Naomi recognized and accepted the God of Israel, it seems that she had reached the point where she could no longer encourage others to place their trust in Him. We’ll see further evidence of that unfortunate reality a little later in this chapter.

XIV

Although Naomi counseled Ruth and Orpah to return to Moab, they would have been better served by traveling with her to the land of Israel. As one commentator observes, “*Naomi incorrectly believed that there was more hope for her daughters-in-law by staying in Moab than there was by going with her to God’s chosen people and land*” (1) This reminds us that a decision that may seem best from our limited vantage point may not hold true when viewed through the lens of God’s perspective.

Nevertheless, it’s clear that Naomi felt a deep sense of emotional distress at the prospect of being separated from her daughters-in-law. That was evidenced by what we read next...

“And they said to her, ‘Surely we will return with you to your people. But Naomi said, ‘Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband.

If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!” (Ruth 1:10-13).

In considering Naomi’s response, it helps to know something about the Old Testament Law and its relevance to childless widows like Ruth and Orpah. If a young widow was left without a son to carry on her husband’s family name, the deceased husband’s brother was responsible to marry her. The couple’s firstborn son would be legally recognized as the deceased man’s offspring and the rightful inheritor of his estate (see [Deuteronomy 25:5-10](#)).

So when Naomi said, “*Even if I got married tonight and later had more sons, would you wait for them to become old enough to marry?*” (CEV), she referred to the fact that she had no further sons to give her daughters-in-law in marriage. And even if she did, the time it would take for them to reach marriageable age was far too long.

(1) Dr. Thomas L. Constable. *Notes On Ruth 2026 Edition* (n.d.). <https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/ruth/ruth.htm>

XV

“...’No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!” (Ruth 1:13).

Naomi’s statement serves as one of the most poignant commentaries within the book of Ruth. In one sentence, Naomi expressed her acceptance of God’s sovereignty over the events of her life and her distress over the effect of those events on her daughters-in-law.

Much like the impact of a stone upon the surface of the water, Naomi saw those resulting events as they rippled out to affect those whom she loved. Her experience reminds us that God’s response to our choices and decisions can impact others for better or worse.

One of the clearest Biblical references to this idea is found in the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians. In that portion of Scripture, the Apostle Paul addressed those who approached the communion table in an unworthy manner...

“So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against[a] the body and blood of the Lord. That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ,[b] you are eating and drinking God’s judgment upon yourself. That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died” (1 Corinthians 11:27-30 NLT).

Paul later went on to illustrate this concept in a more positive manner in his second letter to the church

at Corinth...

“...God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: ‘He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God”
(2 Corinthians 9:8-12 NIV).

One commentary makes a further observation on this subject...

“The RSV translation conveys the thought that Naomi expresses regret that her daughters-in-law have been involved in her affliction, but the Hebrew is ‘for (it is) much more bitter for me than (it is) for you, for the hand of the LORD is gone out against me’. Her meaning seems to be ‘I have lost husband and sons and am too old to remarry and have sons. You have lost husbands, but are young enough to remarry and have sons. Why share my affliction?’

It is significant that Naomi does not attribute her affliction to chance (or) misfortune but to ‘the hand of the LORD’, a common anthropomorphism for the LORD’s over-ruling activity, acknowledged throughout the story.” ⁽¹⁾

For those who wish to benefit from Naomi’s experience, these observations remind us that genuine faith often reveals itself through perseverance and continued reliance on God in periods of difficulty. For instance, James 1:2-4 tells us...

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (NIV).

A few verses later, the Apostle goes on to say, **“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him”** (James 1:12 NIV).

While it is not uncommon to hear others acknowledge God in a moment of triumph or achievement, how many will do so in a period of trouble or uncertainty? Our response to the challenges and difficulties of life often reveals our desire to maintain an intimate relationship with God through Christ or a “feel-good” spiritual experience that fades when the problems of life intervene.

Naomi’s example also calls attention to the fact that others are often watching (and evaluating) our response to the issues of life. This may explain why Ephesians 5:15-16 offers the following reminder: **“Be very careful, then, how you live-not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil”** (NIV).

In Naomi’s case, her example will inspire another person to make a life-changing decision, one that will eventually result in an extraordinary display of God’s faithfulness.

(1) *New International Bible Commentary* general editor G. C. D. Howley, consulting editors F. F. Bruce, H. L. Ellison. Copyright© 1979 by Pickering & Inglis Ltd [pp. 343-344].

XVI

“Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her” (Ruth 1:14).

This verse implies that Orpah did more than simply kiss her mother-in-law in a token display of affection. It indicates that Orpah had decided to kiss her mother-in-law goodbye.

Apparently, the cost of leaving Moab behind was too great for Orpah. In the vocabulary of our 21st-century corporate world, we might say that Orpah made a “business decision” to return to the people and the gods of her childhood home. And perhaps not surprisingly, this is the last time we will read of Orpah in the Scriptures.

So despite her initial willingness to accompany Naomi, Orpah apparently decided that the potential sacrifice involved in traveling to a place where God was blessing his people was not worth the effort. Much like the rich young ruler who [spoke with Jesus in Mark chapter ten](#), Orpah’s decision to return to Moab revealed an internal reality: the life that she had in Moab apparently held more appeal than the prospect of a new life in Israel with the God of the Scriptures.

Orpah’s decision is also reminiscent of a man who once approached Jesus with an offer to become His disciple...

“And another also said, ‘Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God’” (Luke 9:61-62).

Much like Orpah, this man demonstrated an initial willingness to start a new life; that is, until other priorities intervened. Although we don’t know how this man reacted to Jesus’ response, we know that Orpah’s sister-in-law chose a different path: “...***Ruth would not be parted from [Naomi]***” (BBE).

While Orpah showed love and respect for Naomi, Ruth demonstrated a level of devotion and loyalty that her sister-in-law had not shown.

XVII

“And [Naomi] said, ‘Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law’” (Ruth 1:15).

Judging from her response, Naomi clearly understood the significance of Orpah’s decision to remain in Moab. Orpah did more than just turn down a chance to begin anew in her mother-in-law’s town; her decision meant returning “...***to her people and to her gods.***”

That decision stands in contrast to another path chosen by the members of the New Testament church at Thessalonica. In the Biblical letter we know today as 1 Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul assessed the impact made by the Thessalonian congregation and the course they had chosen...

“For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:8-9).

Those who desire to turn to God (like the Christian community at Thessalonica), must actively reject anything that opposes or substitutes for Him. Unlike Orpah (who turned away from the chance to start a new life in order to return to her people and her gods), the Christian community in Thessalonica turned to God and away from anything that might have taken His place.

XVIII

So, Naomi advised Ruth to return to Moab with her sister-in-law. This effectively ensured that her motivation was rooted in a sincere desire to accompany her, and not a sense of guilt or obligation. In doing so, Naomi provided Ruth with an opportunity to choose her path, just as Orpah freely chose to return to the people and the gods of Moab.

However, Ruth was prepared with a seemingly unexpected response...

“But Ruth said: ‘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’” (Ruth 1:16-17).

As Naomi wrestled with the hardships that God permitted to enter her life, her steadfast faith in the God of Israel clearly served to influence Ruth. Although she had suffered the pain and loss of a husband and two sons, Naomi's faith in the God of Israel illustrates the positive impact we can have on others as we rely on God in the midst of hardship.

As for Ruth, her response conveyed a sense of deep personal commitment on several levels:

- First, Ruth was intent on abandoning the idolatrous culture that defined her youth.
- Next, she was determined to follow Naomi's God, the God of the Scriptures.
- Finally, Ruth was an outsider who had resolved to join the community of Israel.

Matthew Henry, the renowned 17th-century commentator, highlighted the spiritual significance of the paths chosen by each of Naomi's daughters-in-law. In doing so, he drew the following comparison to Jesus' message from Luke 9:23: ***“If anyone wants to become my follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.”*** Henry observed...

“Orpah was loth to part from [Naomi]; yet she did not love her well enough to leave Moab for her sake. Thus, many have a value and affection for Christ, yet come short of salvation by him, because they will not forsake other things for him. They love him, yet leave him, because they do not love him enough, but love other things better. Ruth is an example of the grace of God, inclining the soul to choose the better part.” ⁽¹⁾

(1) *Matthew Henry: Commentary on the Whole Bible Volume II (Joshua to Esther) - Christian Classics Ethereal Library.* (n.d.). <https://ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc2/mhc2.Ru.ii.html>

XIX

The honor and virtue reflected in Ruth's response to Naomi has led to its inclusion in countless marriage ceremonies as an affirmation of love, faith, and commitment. Yet Ruth's devotion went far beyond a simple declaration of loyalty to her beloved mother-in-law. Ruth's commitment to Naomi extended to her residence, her family, her culture, and even her final resting place. It also featured an element that exceeded those commitments: ***“...your God will be my God” (CEV).***

Unlike her sister-in-law, Ruth elected to renounce the life that she had known in order to commit herself to following Naomi's God, the God of the Scriptures. That decision meant forsaking the substitutionary gods of Moab for a relationship with the one true God. She also chose to align herself with the people of God despite the faults, idiosyncrasies, and personality quirks they might possess.

Ruth expressed that decision as a total commitment that left no room for doubt: ***“May the LORD's worst punishment come upon me if I let anything but death separate me from you!” (GNB).*** For Ruth, this “all-in” decision meant abandoning the potential for a short-term marriage opportunity, as well as the comfort and familiarity of a place she once called home.

While some may contend that Ruth elected to gamble her future on an ill-advised commitment to an aging woman in a foreign nation, her decision recalls a question Jesus asked centuries later. That question illustrates the real value of Ruth's choice: ***“...what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?” (Mark 8:36-37 ESV).***

Ruth could have followed her sister-in-law back to a culture and a life that held no eternal significance.

Or she might have attempted to bring the pagan gods and idolatrous culture of Moab along with her. Instead, she chose to leave those things behind in order to move forward in a new life with one true God.

XX

“And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. 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?’” (Ruth 1:18-19 ESV).

While “...***both of them went on until they came to Bethlehem***” (GW) may seem inconsequential, it's easy to forget the challenging and difficult nature of travel in the Biblical era. Although 21st-century technology offers multiple options for commuting great distances, travelers of Ruth's day were limited in their choices when taking a land journey.

The first (and often fastest) option involved riding a horse or other animal. Unfortunately, two poor widows like Naomi and Ruth were unlikely to possess such means of transportation. This meant they were probably relegated to walking on foot as a result. At an average walking speed of two miles (3 km) an hour, along with breaks to eat, rest, and attend to other needs, a Biblical traveler might cover fifteen to twenty miles (24-32 km) in a day if the roads and the weather conditions were good.

However, travelers of that era had other issues to contend with. For instance, two women walking alone were vulnerable to attacks by thieves or predatory animals. In addition, any items that a traveler might bring on a journey had to be carried, loaded on a pack animal, or pulled on a cart if one was available. With this in mind, it's easy to see how such things would make this journey more difficult.

Then there was the route itself. Ancient roadways were often little more than footpaths that might easily contribute to foot, leg, or ankle injuries. If we take these realities into consideration, it means this 50-75 mile (80-120 km) trip from Moab to Bethlehem probably took Naomi and Ruth at least a week to complete.

Nevertheless, it appears these two widows arrived in Bethlehem without incident, a silent testament to God's protection considering the dangers they might have encountered along the way. Yet, it also appears that Naomi's long sojourn in Moab had taken its toll upon her, for her hometown acquaintances responded to her return by saying, “***This can't be Naomi, can it?***” (GW).

XXI

“But she said to them, ‘Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?’” (Ruth 1:20-21).

This passage features a play on words that helps us understand Naomi's request to change her name.

People of the Biblical era sometimes received (or requested) names that were descriptive of something that pertained to him or her. For example, it was not uncommon for a parent to name a child after the circumstances of his or her birth. We find one such example in the births of Esau and Jacob as recorded in Genesis 24:24-26...

“When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob...”

The name “Esau” means “rough” or “hairy-feeling” while “Jacob” means “heel-catcher” or “supplanter.” These children acquired their names in recognition of their respective births.

In a similar manner, Naomi requested a name that reflected her circumstances: “***Call me not Naomi,***

call me Mara; for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me” (ASV). Since Naomi’s name means “pleasant,” and Mara means “bitter,” this change reflected the difficult circumstances that God had allowed to enter her life.

Life in Moab had been bitter for Naomi, and she apparently accepted that truth instead of attempting to pretend that it wasn't. Like Job who preceded her and Solomon who followed, ⁽¹⁾ Naomi accepted the fact that God may sometimes allow difficult circumstances to enter our lives. But in the words of Hebrews 12:11...

“No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (HCSB).

(1) See [Job 13:15, 19:25-27](#) and [Ecclesiastes 7:14](#)

XXII

A person who seeks to understand and apply the Biblical Scriptures must account for the language and cultural distinctives that exist within each Biblical book. While timeless Biblical principles such as, ***“You shall have no other gods before me”*** (Exodus 20:3), ***“Love your neighbor as yourself”*** (Mark 12:31), and ***“A man reaps what he sows”*** (Galatians 6:7) apply to any culture, other statements are prone to potential misunderstanding.

Ruth 1:21 offers a case in point: ***“Why do you call me Naomi when the Lord has tormented me and the Almighty has done evil to me?”*** (GW). The New King James (NKJ) translation of Ruth 1:18 offers another example: ***“When [Naomi] saw that [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her”*** (Ruth 1:18).

Today, the idea of “not speaking to someone” implies rejection, loss of fellowship, or the dissolution of a friendly relationship. However, Ruth 1:18 implies something different. Some Biblical translations acknowledge the modern concept of “not speaking to someone” by rendering this passage, ***“she stopped urging her to go back”*** (CEV) or, ***“she stopped trying to persuade her”*** (HCSB).

Naomi’s assertion from Ruth 1:21 functions in much the same manner: ***“How can you still call me Naomi, when God has turned against me and made my life so hard?”*** (CEV). While contemporary readers might interpret that statement as an attempt to blame God for her problems, the reality was probably far different. Here’s how one commentator places that remark in its cultural context...

“(Naomi) speaks respectfully of God (Shaddai, “Almighty”), but in the characteristic Hebrew manner she regards him as the ground of all existence, whether evil or good. While she is complaining about her misfortune (Heb. the Lord has afflicted me), therefore, she should be regarded as reporting upon the trend of events, and not blaming God for disasters in the way that many Gentiles normally do.” ⁽¹⁾

(1) Elwell, W. A. (1996, c1989). *Vol. 3: Evangelical commentary on the Bible. Baker reference library* (Ru 1:15). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

XXIII

“So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest” (Ruth 1:22).

While this passage may appear to be little more than a bridge that transitions the reader from one chapter to another, it actually provides some important information that prepares us for the events to follow.

The barley harvest typically occurred during the April-May period. The wheat harvest followed a few weeks later. For Ruth and Naomi, this meant they were in the right place at the right time, for this provided them with an opportunity to glean the freshly harvested fields once the laborers finished their

work.

This passage also features several ancient agricultural practices that may be unfamiliar to contemporary audiences. For example, a farmer in the Biblical era began a grain harvest by cutting the stalks with a sickle and binding the resulting sheaves into bundles for transport. A donkey or a cart then carried those sheaves to the local threshing floor.

The threshing floor usually comprised a large, flat area with exposure to the prevailing winds. This was a place where the next stage in the harvesting process took place: threshing. That involved loosening the grain portion from the surrounding husk with an ox or a threshing sledge. This portion of the harvesting process will rise to greater prominence later in the book of Ruth.

After loosening the grain from the husk, it was then “winnowed.” Winnowing referred to the act of tossing a pile of grain into the air so the breeze could remove the remaining straw and chaff as the heavier grain fell to the ground. Following this, the grain was sifted to remove any foreign matter and stored for later use. It was during this period that Ruth and Naomi arrived in Bethlehem.

So, at this stage in our narrative, Naomi has lost her entire family except for one foreigner who had been married to her late son. Yet despite these seemingly dire circumstances, God will eventually bestow a tremendous blessing upon Naomi through the unlikely avenue of “*Ruth the Moabitess*.”