

Naomi: From Tragedy to Triumph

(Ruth 1—4)

What is life like? I wish I could tell you that life is always pleasant and happy and profitable, that it is made up of positives without any negatives. But I cannot. You know, as well as I, that life is often hard, disappointing, bitter—that the fabric of the pleasant life is torn too often by disappointment, losses, and death. Why is it like that? What does God have to do with the tragedy that life often brings? And how can we deal with our disappointments? These are questions that cry out for answers.

The book of Ruth provides at least partial answers to those questions, not so much in the story it tells of Ruth as in the story it tells of Naomi. In fact, the book of Ruth could really be thought of as the story of Naomi. And it is a story of tragedy that ended in triumph. Let us think about that story.

FROM TRAGEDY

It is the time of the judges (1:1). Israel had conquered Canaan and had remained faithful to the Lord for some time. But then Israel turned away from the God who had delivered them out of Egypt. When this happened, God sent an oppressor—another nation—which oppressed Israel. After a period of time, the people repented and cried out for relief, and God then sent a judge, a deliverer—someone like Othniel or Ehud or Gideon—who, by the power of God, delivered the people from the oppressor. But the people refused to learn; soon they turned away from God, and the cycle started over. This happened repeatedly in the time of the judges.

Consequently, this is a time of apostasy and corruption, a time of war, violence, and bloodshed.

But those events do not necessarily touch the lives of the average Israelite living quietly on his piece of land. He is concerned, not about national politics, but about “little things” like love and marriage, birth and death, and making a living. So, I suspect, it has been throughout the ages: The armies of kings fight wars and make history, but the “little people worry about the “little things”—like surviving.

There arises a famine in the land (1:1). A man named Elimelech (1:2) is concerned about surviving. To find food, he takes his family and goes to Moab. Think about that family: There is no indication that they were rich, but still, they were, I imagine, quite happy. Naomi is Elimelech’s wife; she has all she needs—a good husband, two strong sons, Mahlon and Chilion, and the opportunity to find refuge in Moab when times are hard in Israel. The Moabites are distant cousins of the Israelites. Frequently, they were enemies of Israel, but at this time, the Moabites welcome the little family from Israel.

Imagine that family of four as they arrive in Moab—sad because of what they have left behind, but thankful to be able to survive and thankful especially to have one another! “Thank You, Lord, for saving us from the famine,” they might have prayed. To one another they might have said, “As long as we’re together, as long as we have one another, well be all right.”

But, apparently, they have hardly arrived when Elimelech dies (1:3), leaving his wife Naomi a widow with two sons to care for. This was not an unusual occurrence; so many husbands die before their wives, even today. But what would Naomi have felt as she followed that slow procession to the burial ground, knowing full well

that her husband, her man, the one with whom she had lived, slept, worked, and suffered . . . she would never see again. What were her thoughts? “How can I live without him?”; “Why did he leave me like this?”; “What will I do?”; “There’s no one now to help the boys”; “I can’t bear the pain; I can’t carry on.”

But she does live on. Time insulates her from the initial shock. She plunges into life again. After all, she still has the two boys; they are a comfort to her; she can live for them. She derives some satisfaction, no doubt, from seeing her sons married. Even though they marry Moabite women (1:4), it seems obvious that she (and Elimelech) will have an heir someday—someone to carry on the family name and traditions. As it usually does after the death of a loved one, life goes on, one day follows another; the family begins to live again on a level of pleasant sameness; humdrum tasks bring healing. The boys earn a living for their mother, and hope emerges from behind the clouds.

Then tragedy strikes again: One of Naomi’s sons dies. For a second time, Naomi is forced to walk behind a coffin and see the body of another one of the three people dearest to her in the whole world buried in the cold earth. What a sledgehammer blow that must have been! Shocked almost out of her senses, she must have lived for a while almost in a dream world. Her world was falling apart. But she still had one son.

Then, it must have seemed to her almost no time at all, she has to walk that hard road a third time. She has to perhaps listen to the clods thud on the coffin as they bury her only remaining son. The Bible simply says, “The woman was bereft of her two children and her husband” (1:5). What a world of feelings those words conceal! She had a husband—now he is dead. She had two sons—now they are dead. It was a nightmare, but she will never wake up from it.

Her tragedy is even greater than that nightmare. Put yourself in her place. What problems do you have? (1) You are a stranger in a foreign land, living among foreigners—separated from your own country, without family or clan or countrymen to protect you. (2) You have no husband, and therefore, no companion with whom to share your life. (3) You have no means of support. Widows, generally, were dependent on the benevolence of others. A widow’s chil-

dren would care for her, but you have no children. (4) You have no child and no heir! In those days a woman without a child was to be pitied above all others. Perhaps just as tragic, Elimelech’s line would disappear from the earth.

Naomi herself describes her tragedy when she returns to her own city: “And it came about when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’” (1:19). Why the question? Perhaps it was asked because in the short ten years (1:4) since she left, so much had changed—and perhaps because *she* had changed so much. She had “broken,” we might say; her troubles showed on her face to such an extent that she was almost unrecognizable. “Is this really Naomi—this old woman, so stooped, so sad, her face so lined, so broken by the ravages of time and circumstances?”

Naomi replies, “Do not call me Naomi [which means pleasant]; call me Mara [which means bitter], . . .” (1:20). The pleasantness of her life had become bitter; the fullness had become emptiness; joy had turned to grief. She had lost everything she counted precious; her life had become a tragedy.

TO TRIUMPH

After detailing Naomi’s problems, the story shows how those problems are solved, one by one.

Naomi solves the first problem herself when, seeing the helplessness of her situation in Moab, she determines to return to her own people. There, at least, she can perhaps receive the benevolence due a widow. Eventually, she arrives in Bethlehem, and she can breathe a sigh of relief at being “home” again. Again she has a place and a people of her own.

As she begins her journey her second problem is taken care of. Her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, at first accompany her. Then, like the good woman and dutiful mother-in-law that she is, she tells them to return. She has their good at heart; they will more likely find husbands in Moab than if they go with her. Orpah agrees and stays in Moab. But Ruth refuses, saying, “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. 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" (1:16, 17).

It would be hard to find a more tender expression of love—and of the commitment that biblical love requires—in any literature anywhere. One interesting thing is that they are words spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. But they also represent the solution to one aspect of Naomi's tragedy: They speak of Ruth's deepseated commitment to love and care for Naomi. Naomi no longer is bereft of family and companions; she has a daughter-in-law who, as the women of Bethlehem say later to Naomi, is one "who loves you and is better to you than seven sons" (4:15).

Perhaps even more important, Ruth says, "Your God [will be] my God." The Moabite woman has become an Israelite, a worshiper of the Lord! (See also 2:12.) Naomi's tragedy has resulted in at least this one good thing—a convert to the one true God! Even the greatest tragedy may have in it something of value—perhaps even, once in a while, a convert to the Lord.

But a third problem remains. If you are Naomi, you are back in Bethlehem where you came from. It is good to be back among your own people; it is good to have a daughter as a companion to love you and be with you. But you still have no means of support. What is to be done?

Ruth is the answer. Because the law of Moses had made gracious provisions for the poor, Ruth can glean in the fields after the reapers—that is, she can pick up the small amounts of grain missed by those who harvested the field.

In fact, it is Ruth's idea. She goes out and works hard in the fields, toiling on Naomi's behalf. Her hard work (and probably her good looks) attracts the attention of the man in whose field she "happens" to find herself (2:3). He is especially impressed by what Ruth is doing for her mother-in-law. He says, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, . . ." (2:12). He is so impressed that he makes arrangements for Ruth to glean in his field throughout the harvest time and for her to receive favored treatment from his own reapers (2:16).

What is the result? That first day Ruth brings home more than expected, and each day through-

out the harvest the story is repeated. Though poor, Naomi and Ruth are now well taken care of, by a combination of Ruth's diligence at work, the farmer's generosity, and the "luck" that brought the two together.

Naomi's tragedy is resolving itself. She again has a country and a people, someone to be her companion and to take care of her, and a means of support. The story does not stop there because the problems do not stop there. Naomi still has no heir.

The story seems to shift the spotlight. Naomi, we may think, is taken care of. But what about Ruth? She has no husband. Naomi is concerned about her daughter-in-law's finding of a husband. As soon as Naomi learns about the kindnesses that Boaz, the owner of the field, has done on behalf of Ruth, you can almost hear her mind ticking over: "Ah hah! Here's something interesting! Boaz—a good man, a prosperous man [2:1 says he is "a man of great wealth"], a kinsman—must like my Ruth. Maybe, just maybe, he'd be interested in marrying her." Of course, Naomi does not say that; wise mothers never blurt out such things. She just counsels Ruth to accept Boaz's offer (2:22).

But the plans are in the making: Ruth shall have a husband! In fact, she shall have Boaz for a husband! In order for this marriage to happen, two obstacles must be overcome.

First, Boaz's own reluctance must be overcome; he has to be willing to marry Ruth. Naomi takes care of this problem. At the end of the harvest when Boaz is winnowing grain, and in keeping with some now unknown custom, she suggests that Ruth go lie down at the feet of Boaz. Apparently this was a way a woman could press her claims on a man. Ruth's claim to Boaz lay in the fact that in Bible times when a man died without leaving an heir, it was the responsibility of the nearest kinsman to marry the widow and to rear a child. Ruth follows Naomi's suggestion and says to Boaz, "I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative" (3:9). She is proposing to him! It would appear Boaz could have refused. But he does not. In fact he seems thrilled that Ruth has chosen him, an older man, rather than a younger man. He does the right thing and says he will in fact marry her if he can.

A second obstacle is to be overcome. Another man is a closer kinsman than Boaz. He has “first refusal” rights to Mahlon’s estate, including Mahlon’s widow.

The next day Boaz meets with this nearer kinsman, calls his attention to Naomi’s selling the rights to the land that belonged to Elimelech, and asks him if he would like to buy it. He agrees to do so. Then Boaz says that he also has to take Ruth if he takes the field; the widow goes with the land.

The nearer kinsman balks at this, saying that it will endanger his own inheritance (4:6). Apparently, he could take the land and use its produce to support Naomi. Then, when they died, it would remain in his family. That would have been profitable; it would have made sense. However, if he takes Ruth along with the land, he must have a child to Ruth, and that child will be thought of as the child of Ruth’s dead husband Mahlon. The land will have to support both Naomi and Ruth plus the child. Then, when the kinsman and Ruth die, the land will be regarded as belonging to Mahlon’s child—it will not be passed on in the line of the kinsman. What seemed to be a good deal now is not such a good deal. So the nearer kinsman says, “No.”

That leaves Boaz free to redeem, or buy back, the land. This he does. He obtains the rights of the nearest kinsman, and he can now marry Ruth.

The two obstacles have been overcome. Thus we read, “So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, . . .” (4:13).

Then comes the climax to the story: “. . . And the Lord enabled her [Ruth] to conceive, and she gave birth to a son” (4:13). What a triumph this was for Ruth. The poor widow is now the wife of a rich man and the mother of a fine son! Notice what the book of Ruth says:

Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. And the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David (4:14-17).

Whose child is this? He is Ruth’s and Boaz’s. But the book says the child is Naomi’s! It is

Naomi who has lost her husband and her sons, Naomi who has no heir. Now it is Naomi who has a son and an heir! Naomi’s last problem is solved . . . And gloriously solved. That son, born after the days and years of tragedy, was Obed—the grandfather of David, Israel’s greatest king, and the ancestor of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world! Amen.

BY WHAT MEANS?

In the book of Ruth we learn of the tragedy of Naomi and of how her tragedy turned into triumph. An alien in a foreign land, she came home. Bereft of husband and sons, she acquired a daughter-in-law who was more to her than seven sons. Without any means of support, she was cared for by Ruth. Lacking an heir, she became the grandmother of one who would someday be the grandfather of the king of Israel!

The question is: How did it happen? What brought about the triumph?

We might think, “It was luck.” We might be want to say, “Isn’t it wonderful how everything just seemed to fall into place? How fortunate, how lucky, Naomi was!” But that is not the answer, at least not according to the book of Ruth.

We might think, “Love, hard work, and duty.” Indeed, all these play a part in producing our happy ending. There are no villains in the book of Ruth. Ruth was concerned about Naomi and worked hard to care for her. Naomi was concerned about Ruth and found a way for her to get a husband. Boaz was kind to the poor widows, and then he did the right thing for Ruth by marrying her. Even the townspeople of Bethlehem provided a kind of chorus that shared in Naomi’s experiences. They were sympathetic and joyful at appropriate times—they, too, “do the right thing.” But neither is this the answer we find in the book itself.

The answer, according to the book of Ruth, is: God. God did it!

The name of God permeates the book. When the famine was over, it was the Lord who had given Israel food (1:6). When Ruth was converted to the true God, she said, “Your God [will be] my God” (1:16). She was then described as one who had taken refuge under the wings of the Lord (2:12). Blessings were given in the name of the Lord (1:8; 2:4; 3:10; 4:11, 12, 14). People took oaths in the name of the Lord (1:16, 17; 3:13).

More important, it was the Lord who brought the tragedy upon Naomi. What would *we* say caused her problems? Fate? Bad luck? The laws of nature? We might just say, “That’s the way it goes sometimes.” Naomi did not say any of those things. To her daughters-in-law she said, “The hand of the Lord has gone forth against me” (1:13). To the women of Bethlehem she said, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 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?” (1:20, 21).

Naomi said, “The Lord afflicted me. He brought me home empty.” We might be tempted to say, “Hush, Naomi! That’s heresy. You’re trying the Lord’s patience when you talk like that.” But the Lord did not seem displeased. Maybe we should ask: Do we show more faith when we attribute our afflictions to fate, or does Naomi show more faith when she attributes her afflictions to God?

If the book of Ruth says that it was the Lord who brought Naomi’s tragedy, it also says that it was the Lord who effected Naomi’s triumph. Consider 2:3: “. . . and she *happened* to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, . . .” (Emphasis mine.) This was a pivotal occurrence in the plot. If she did not glean in Boaz’s field, the rest of the story was not possible. Did she just “happen” to be there? Was it blind luck? Coincidence? I doubt that the original readers would have thought so. I expect that they, when they read this, would have chuckled knowingly, winked at one another, nodded their heads, and said, “Happened? Sure—just as Israel ‘happened’ to be God’s chosen people!” At any rate, when Ruth reported the day’s events to Naomi, this was Naomi’s response: “May he be blessed of the Lord who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead” (2:20). Naomi said the Lord’s kindness was shown in Boaz’s kindness to Ruth. It was not luck that guided Ruth’s steps to Boaz’s field; it was God!

When we come to the end of the story, it is made plain: God did it! “So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And *the Lord enabled her to conceive*, and she gave birth to a son. Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed is *the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today*, and may his name become famous in Israel’ (4:13, 14; emphasis mine).

Thus, in the book of Ruth we have a story told on two levels. On one level, specific circumstances—including apparently “lucky” breaks—combine with loyal and diligent acts of love and commitment to produce a favorable result. On another level, God—working in and through circumstances and people—brings about a favorable result. *God turns tragedy into triumph!*

What a triumph it was! Naomi had lost so much, but she gained even more! She gained the privilege of being an ancestress of Israel’s greatest king and of our Lord Jesus Christ! If the book of Job teaches that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away—“Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21)—the book of Ruth teaches us that the Lord takes away and the Lord gives, and what He gives is more than He takes away!

Therefore, we can believe: God can turn around our tragedies. He is not far away somewhere; He is not unconcerned about the lives of His children. God still works in the world today. He can work in the most adverse circumstances to produce a happy ending. God can today, as He did for Naomi, turn our tragedies into triumphs.

Life is not always pleasant; it is sometimes bitter. Even when life is cruel, we need to submit to God’s will for us and humbly try to be a blessing to others—to be diligent in our work and true to our commitments. We need to “do the right thing” always. It may be that our extremity will become God’s opportunity to triumph over our tragedy. That makes it possible for us to say: “. . . If God is for us, who is against us? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:31, 35, 37).

Time

Time cannot steal the treasures
That we carry in our hearts,
Nor ever dim the shining thoughts
Our cherished past imparts,
And memories of the ones we’ve loved
Still cast their gentle glow
To grace our days and light our paths
Wherever we may go.

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