

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a vibrant red sleeveless dress, is captured in a dynamic pose as if running or dancing through a field of tall, golden-brown grass. The background is a clear blue sky with soft, wispy white clouds. The overall mood is one of freedom and joy.

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS

Best-selling author of *Bad Girls of the Bible*

*The*  
Girl's  
Still  
Got  
It

Take a Walk  
*with* Ruth *and the* God  
Who Rocked Her World



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*For my mother-in-law,  
Mary Lee Higgs,  
with heaps of love  
and my deepest gratitude*



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*Great Sea*

*"In the days  
when the judges ruled..."*

RUTH 1:1

*Jordan River*

Jericho ●

*Plains of  
Moab*

A M M O N

Jerusalem ●

Bethlehem ●

▲ *Mount Nebo*

Hebron ●

*Salt  
Sea*

*Arnon River*

J U D A H

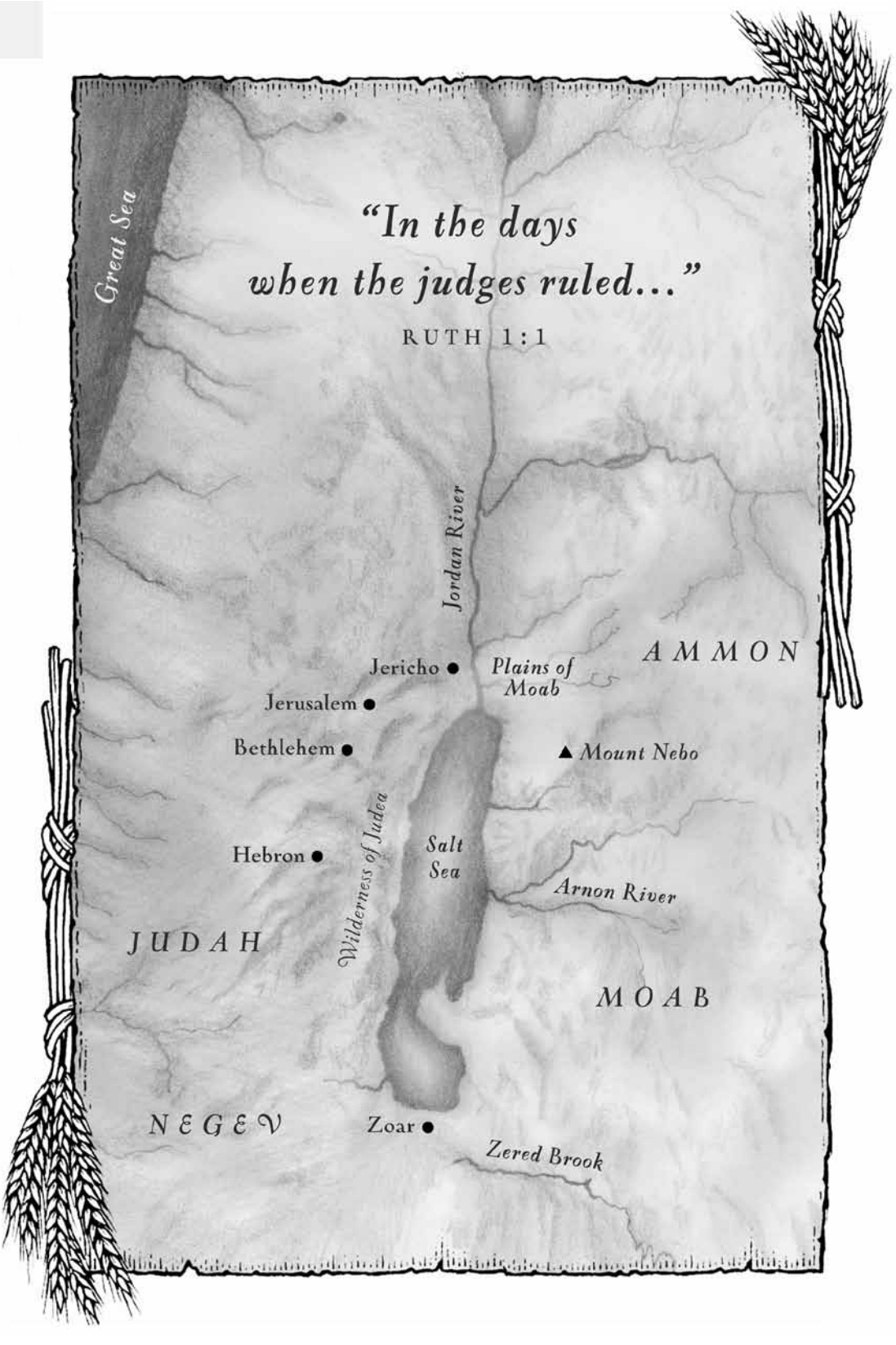
*Wilderness of Judea*

M O A B

N E G E V

Zoar ●

*Zered Brook*





*Before We Dive In*



## Which Girl's Still Got It?

*R*uth's definitely got it. Yes, *that* Ruth. The one in the Bible. And her mother-in-law, Naomi? She's still got it too. So do you, beloved.

What do I mean by "it"? Value. Significance. Vibrancy. Worth. Something vital and meaningful to offer, no matter how many times you've been around the block.

Look at Ruth. Even thirty-two centuries later, her shining example of boldness and faithfulness still blows us away. Why don't we take a walk in her sandals and see where the Lord might lead us and how he might use us?

Resist the urge to say you're too old, too young, too busy, too scared, too worn out, too washed up, too *anything* to be useful to God. Truth is, you've always been part of his love-the-world plan. Need proof? From the day he formed you in your mother's womb, God has watched over your every step, making sure you got where you needed to go.

When you stumbled, it was God who steadied you.

When you fell, it was God who rescued you.

When you lost your way, it was God who carried you home.

Why? Because he knows you fully, loves you completely, and holds you close to his heart. God will never give up on you, my sister. You claim a special place in his Big Picture.

As the book of Proverbs says, "You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail."<sup>1</sup> Count on it. As surely as we know how the book of Ruth ends—happily—God knows how your story is going to unfold.



We don't use the phrase *divine providence* much anymore, but here's what it means: "God is there, God cares, God rules, and God provides."<sup>2</sup> How comforting to know that we're never alone and never unloved, that Someone powerful is in charge and looking out for us. The book of Ruth is a crash course in Sovereignty 101, with God whispering all through it, "Trust me!"

Okay, but *trust* is an easy word to say and a hard thing to do. It took a decade of Bad Girl foolishness before I understood how good and trustworthy God is. The refrain of one classic hymn never fails to bring a lump to my throat (not good when you're trying to sing):

Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him!  
 How I've proved Him o'er and o'er!  
 Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!  
 O for grace to trust Him more!<sup>3</sup>

Yeah, that last bit. Gets me every time.

From childhood Naomi learned to trust the sovereign God of Israel. Ruth discovered his faithfulness a bit further down the road. Some of us are only now realizing what it means to live in the circle of God's embrace and at the absolute center of his will.

I'm still getting my head around it. Maybe you are too.

Suppose we hang out with these ancient sisters for a season and see what they can teach us about God's steadfast love. First, we need to figure out how to transport Naomi and Ruth into the present. Or project ourselves into the distant past.

*Hmm...*

## TIME TRAVEL WITHOUT THE DELOREAN

If only we could jump into a time machine! Instead of simply reading about biblical history, we could live it. Rather than merely studying maps and books, we could see, touch, and experience that long-lost world firsthand. Wouldn't that be something?



H. G. Wells created a device for his Time Traveller out of nickel, ivory, and quartz. Doc Brown sent Marty McFly back to 1955 in a plutonium-powered DeLorean. I'm thinking we'll employ something God designed—our imaginations—and toss in a healthy measure of old-fashioned research. (No worries. That's my gig.)

Page by page I want us to *go* there—to Moab, to Bethlehem, to the days of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. We'll tarry in the corners of their homes and listen to their conversations and consider every word of every verse until we can say, “I *totally* get the book of Ruth. And I see what God is trying to teach me through this rags-to-riches redemption story—he has a plan for my life.”

Girl, does he ever!

Before we step back in time, here are three things you're going to love about the book of Ruth.

***First, it's a guaranteed great read.***

A combo of “literary art and theological insight,”<sup>4</sup> these four chapters in Scripture have “enchanted every age,”<sup>5</sup> including our own. I've pored over Ruth's story in fourteen translations and a hundred books and commentaries, and I still get tears in my eyes when the women of Bethlehem sing out, “Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer.”<sup>6</sup> Yes, yes, yes!

Plus, the book of Ruth has all the stuff English majors swoon over: fascinating parallels, flashbacks, and clever repetition. Watch for all the uses of *return* (*shubh* in Hebrew) and *favor* (*hesed*). Very cool. Scottish theologian Sinclair Ferguson said, “Like the stories we loved to hear again and again in childhood, the pleasure of this one lies partly in spotting the clues.”<sup>7</sup> We'll be regular Nancy Drews before we're done.

It's also a deliciously chatty story. In the New International Version nearly *sixty* of the eighty-five verses include dialogue. Lots of “she said, he said.”

Love it.

***Second, wait until you find out how this true story began.***

Though Jewish tradition gives Samuel props for writing the book of Ruth,<sup>8</sup> most modern scholars don't agree. It's a timing problem, since the book ends



with David's name. Everyone reading it three millennia ago would have smiled and nodded, recognizing the famous ruler. Yet Samuel died before David became king around 1010 BC, meaning Samuel's authorship is improbable.<sup>9</sup>

Instead, the book of Ruth was likely composed around 1000 BC,<sup>10</sup> a century or two after the actual events. Could be it was written even more recently than that, anywhere from 1000 to 500 BC,<sup>11</sup> depending on who's doing the research.

Guess who preserved the account of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz until it was finally recorded? Storytellers.

Accomplished troupes knew all the favorite songs and familiar legends and shared them at public gatherings and festivals.<sup>12</sup> Since the book of Ruth began in poetic, oral form and circulated that way for ages,<sup>13</sup> these storytellers of old kept Ruth's history alive by carefully memorizing every word, then recounting the much-loved tale wherever people hung out, especially around the spring or at the town gate.<sup>14</sup>

Don't panic! This is still God's Word, a work of the Holy Spirit. Through the centuries the Lord used ordinary people to bind his truth onto stone, clay, papyrus, leather, parchment, copper, potsherds, and silver.<sup>15</sup> Yet many of the ancient texts, those God-breathed words, were spoken long before they were written.

Ruth's story is so skillfully arranged, so beautifully narrated, we can easily imagine a gifted storyteller standing before an audience, commanding everyone's undivided attention from the opening words: "And it came to pass in the days of the judges..."

### *That third thing you'll love?*

The book of Ruth is all about our biblical sisters. They don't simply make an appearance or hover in the background; it's a women's story through and through. Some commentators go a step further, believing the Naomi-Ruth saga was "passed on by a guild of women storytellers."<sup>16</sup> Other scholars suggest "the writer was a woman."<sup>17</sup>

Oh my. Not only *spoken* by women but also *written* by a woman?

Well, we know songs written by women are included in Scripture. Miriam exhorted the assembled, "Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted."<sup>18</sup> Deborah



declared in her own voice and words, "Wake up, wake up, break out in song!"<sup>19</sup> And Mary sang with all her heart, "My soul glorifies the Lord."<sup>20</sup>

If God placed those lyrics in the hearts and mouths of our sisters and saved them for eternity in his Word, might he also have entrusted a woman writer to faithfully preserve the story of Ruth?

Not trying to convince you, dear one. Just tossing it out there.

After three thousand years we can't be certain "whether the real author was male or female."<sup>21</sup> But we can be sure of Jesus, "the author and perfecter of our faith,"<sup>22</sup> who has written his name across our hearts and whose eternal Word is true.

## THIS ONE'S FOR THE GIRLS

We can also be certain of this: women matter a great deal to God. No book of the Bible demonstrates that more powerfully than Ruth.

Here are seven you-go-girl truths that jumped out at me as I read her story.

### *Two women command the leading roles.*

You won't find another book like it in Scripture. Brief scenes featuring only women are rare; Mary's visit to Elizabeth in Luke 1 comes to mind. But a story that has two female leads plus a whole chorus of sopranos and altos? Remarkable to find a book of the Bible so "unusually woman-centered both in language and in plot."<sup>23</sup> Not only that, they're strong, intelligent women who, as they say in Hollywood, can carry a film.

### *Naomi and Ruth are complex and distinctive, not stereotypes.*

They represent two nationalities, two religions at first, two generations, and two very different personalities. No need to ask who's speaking when you read their words. The Bible is filled with Good Girls and Bad Girls, often contrasted with each other. In Proverbs we find archetypes of the wise woman and the foolish woman,<sup>24</sup> the kindhearted woman and the immoral woman.<sup>25</sup> But in Naomi and Ruth we see *real* women, even flawed women, who change and grow throughout their journey.



***The story is told from a female viewpoint.***

I wouldn't dare call Scripture chick lit, but the book of Ruth "seems to reflect a female perspective."<sup>26</sup> A male commentator wrote those words, and he's absolutely right: we see all the early scenes through the eyes of Naomi and Ruth. Even when Boaz appears, his dialogue is solely about helping these two women. (Like something straight from the Lifetime channel, you know?)

***Naomi and Ruth are cooperative instead of competitive.***

When Sarai and Hagar take the biblical stage together in Genesis 16, it is *not* pretty. Same thing with Rachel and Leah in Genesis 30, and Hannah and Peninnah in 1 Samuel 1. Regular catfights, all. Yet in the book of Ruth, we find a young woman and her mother-in-law walking in the same direction (imagine that!) and seeking the same goals: putting food on the table and keeping the family name alive. Ruth looks out for Naomi from the start. Later Naomi looks out for Ruth. Go, team!

***These women make things happen rather than wait for things to happen.***

Instead of playing the passive-aggressive card, Naomi and Ruth are in the game. They talk and act independently of men and do what needs to be done. Often in biblical narrative things happen *to* women—sad things, even horrible things. Yet these two take their future into their own hands. You'll soon find "it is female assertiveness which drives the story's action."<sup>27</sup> When tragedy strikes their household, Naomi and Ruth don't sit moping in Moab, hoping someone will rescue them. They go, they do, they seek, they find—with God leading the way.

***The women are strong, and the men are mostly...um, weak.***

Just sayin'. Even when Naomi and Ruth burst into tears, "neither woman strikes the reader as weak, helpless, or lost."<sup>28</sup> In contrast, the men die, are unnamed, or shirk their responsibilities. Spiritually, emotionally, and physically, the men in this story (other than Boaz, of course) pale in comparison to our stalwart sisters.



***Females are continually discussed, acknowledged, and praised—by name.***

The number of nameless women in Scripture is legion. The woman at the well,<sup>29</sup> the bleeding woman,<sup>30</sup> the slave girl who predicts the future<sup>31</sup>—the list goes on and on. Yet our female leads in Ruth are all named. Additional name-dropping takes place near the end of the narrative when Tamar, Rachel, and Leah are spoken of in glowing terms—and by the *men* of Bethlehem, no less. These men saw with their own eyes that the Israelite faith was “cherished, defended, and exemplified by women.”<sup>32</sup>

Suffice it to say, Naomi and Ruth were important to God’s people. And God meant the world to Naomi and Ruth. They turned to him for provision, honored him through their obedience, and blessed him with their words.

## OUR FIRST, OUR LAST, OUR EVERYTHING

Why study the girls (and guys) of the Bible? Because they help us understand God’s character. Through the fickleness of his people, he reveals his unchanging nature. Through their neediness, he demonstrates his compassion. Through their rash behavior, he exhibits his patience. Through their sinful choices, he shows us what mercy looks like. Through their bitter complaints, he proves his capacity to love the unlovable. Through their disloyalty, his faithfulness shines.

However fitting it may be that this book of the Bible has Ruth’s name on it, make no mistake: this is the Lord’s story, and he alone claims center stage. As one commentator wrote, “It is God’s actions we are to learn about, not a series of admirable human qualities.”<sup>33</sup> Exactly so. Our desire as believers isn’t to be more like Ruth; it’s to be more like Jesus. With each admirable thing Ruth does, we’ll see the Lord’s hand at work.

God doesn’t have a speaking role or make a physical appearance in the book of Ruth, but we’ll sense his constant presence, steady as a heartbeat. When we reach the final page, I hope that instead of saying, “Wow, what a woman!” we’ll be saying, “Wow, what a Redeemer!”

One more thing, sis. Take a minute to check out the resources in the back of this book in case you’d like to use them while you read: a short list of



Discussion Questions for book clubs; a longer Study Guide for more in-depth, chapter-by-chapter Bible study; and a recommended reading list for those of us who like to dig even deeper.

Now then, I promised you a journey in a time machine. With hearts engaged and Bibles in hand, let's travel back to 1200 BC, give or take a few decades, and meet King David's great-grandmother as a young woman in her midtwenties.<sup>34</sup>

*Wait.* Is that Ruth wearing an ugly black thingy?

Oh dear. I hadn't expected to find her like *this*.





## Off to a Rocky Start

The girl doesn't need a big *R* embroidered on her tunic to give her away. See that graceful posture? And that tender expression on her face? Gotta be our Ruth.

Looks as if we've come at a bad time, though.

Beneath the blazing desert sun, large stones mark the outlines of two fresh graves, with earthen mounds covering the bodies. Two husbands, buried on the day of their passing—a must in a country this hot.<sup>1</sup>

Just as well no one can see or hear us. I never know what to say at funerals, and all my words of comfort sound like clichés. So we stand with our backs pressed against the rough trunk of a date palm tree and watch two young widows and their grieving mother-in-law face the darkest day of their lives.

All three women are wearing coarse sackcloth, woven from goat's hair and dyed black.<sup>2</sup> Makes me itch just looking at them. But then, this day isn't about comfort or fashion. Sackcloth is worn as a sign of repentance or mourning.<sup>3</sup>

*Father God, are they aware of your presence? Are they even now whispering your name?*

If you've buried the love of your life, you understand at a deeply personal level what Ruth is going through: the numbness, the heartache, the emptiness.

She stands a few steps back lest her tunic brush against her husband's burial mound and leave her ceremonially unclean,<sup>4</sup> at least in her mother-in-law's eyes. A major nuisance, that Mosaic Law: "anyone who touches a human bone or a grave...will be unclean for seven days."<sup>5</sup> *Seven days?* It's amazing people attended funerals in Israel with that risk hanging over their heads.



Ruth's sister-in-law, Orpah, is wailing, tears coursing down her cheeks. Behind them stands Naomi, resting her hands on their shoulders. Offering solace, perhaps. Or leaning on them for support.

Easy enough to figure out how Orpah and Ruth got here: this is their hometown. But how did Naomi, a daughter of Israel, end up in a graveyard on the outskirts of a nameless settlement in Moab, where the people worship the evil god Chemosh? The answer is what screenwriters call the *back story*, the details from a character's past that shape her present and hint at her future.

As it happens, the book of Ruth opens with Naomi's back story, squeezing ten years into five short verses. While our sisters tarry in the hot sun, paying their respects, we'll get the goods on this midlife matriarch. More than one writer thinks the book of Ruth should be called "The Book of Naomi."<sup>6</sup> Let's see why.

## ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

In the days... *Ruth 1:1*

Well, that's an exciting start. No, really. Back then these few words told the listeners that trouble was on the horizon, with a happy ending sure to follow.<sup>7</sup> The best kind of story. Whether rendered "now it came to pass" (KJV) or "long ago" (NCV) or "once upon a time" (MSG), this simple Hebrew phrase signaled the audience: you are going to love this!

...when the judges ruled,... *Ruth 1:1*

That's our time frame, somewhere between 1220 and 1050 BC,<sup>8</sup> during the Iron Age (not to be confused with an indie rock band from Austin, a tattoo parlor in Saint Louis, or steel-toed boots—but who's Googling?). Though we can't be certain, the story of Ruth probably falls chronologically between Ehud and Jephthah,<sup>9</sup> two of the many guys mentioned in Judges.

The final verse of Judges sums things up: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."<sup>10</sup> Uh-oh. When people do their own thing, it's seldom a good thing and almost never a God thing. Like rebellious children, the people of Israel "refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways."<sup>11</sup>



Those were seriously chaotic years, “a bleak, dark time of disobedience on the part of God’s people.”<sup>12</sup>

Then, like an oasis in the desert, Naomi and Ruth’s story appears as a welcome relief from all the warfare and savagery. We’ll find no signs or wonders, no parting seas or burning bushes, no dens of lions or fiery furnaces. The only miracles in the book of Ruth are changed lives.

Best. Miracles. Ever.

Of course, it wouldn’t be much of a story if everything went smoothly. Instead, Naomi and her family face one disaster after another, beginning with a scenario that would surely strike fear in my heart.

...there was a famine in the land,... *Ruth 1:1*

Not just a few days without food. Israel was utterly ravaged, and the people were starving—Naomi and her family included.

Various troubles can bring crops to a halt. Too little rain in the growing season, too much rain in the harvest season, and hungry locusts and caterpillars in any season. However, this famine was no “accident of history but the out-working of God’s covenant promise”<sup>13</sup> made generations earlier to Abraham.

By the time of our story, Abe’s descendants are playing fast and loose with God’s favor. A constant refrain echoes through the book of Judges, which spans more than three hundred years: “the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD.”<sup>14</sup> I mean, those exact words appear *six times*. How stubborn can people be?

*Sorry, Lord.* I know the answer to that one all too well.

God takes no pleasure in our suffering. But he takes even less pleasure in our unfaithfulness. When the Israelites of old “forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers,” worshiping instead the gods of their Canaanite neighbors, they “provoked the LORD to anger.”<sup>15</sup>

How deeply did his anger burn? Hot enough to singe the ground.

The last biblical famine had occurred during Joseph’s time, and God had put that one in motion too: “He called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food.”<sup>16</sup>

That sovereignty thing in action? Right. God really is in charge, and he really does know what he’s doing. The famine in Egypt made a way forward for



Joseph “till the word of the LORD proved him true.”<sup>17</sup> And that same famine, terrible as it was, brought Joseph’s brothers to his door for a God-ordained reunion.

Whenever heartache, loss, disappointment, stress, or any of the other stuff we hate comes our way, it helps to remember that hard times are purposeful, meant to refine and redirect us. They’re not arbitrary or random, and they’re definitely not cruel. If I’m going to suffer, at least let it be for a good reason. Make that a God reason.

If we start thinking, *A loving God wouldn’t do that*, we miss the truth recorded in his Word and the seeds of hope planted deep in our parched soil: God loves us too much to let us starve spiritually.

That’s why this famine struck Israel.

Unfortunately, Naomi wasn’t humbled yet. Merely hungry, like her husband.

## MAN, OH MAN

...and a man from Bethlehem in Judah,... *Ruth 1:1*

No name is given here, just “a certain man” (KJV) from Bethlehem. Find Jerusalem on the map, then head south five or six miles along the eastern ridge of the central mountain range, and there it is: O little town of Bethlehem. Before the famine this man and his family would’ve gazed across richly cultivated expanses beyond the town gate: fields of wheat and barley, groves of olive trees, and vines laden with grapes. Bethlehem was the “granary of the country.”<sup>18</sup> Even the word *Bethlehem* in Hebrew means “house of bread” or “house of food.”<sup>19</sup>

But those days were over.

...together with his wife and two sons,... *Ruth 1:1*

One husband, one wife, two sons. They sound like the Cleavers on *Leave It to Beaver*, the perfect suburban family. Still no names given for our Bethlehem bunch. Not Ward, not June, not Wally.

And that place they called home, that “good and spacious land, a land flow-



ing with milk and honey”?<sup>20</sup> With the cows dying and the bees no longer buzzing, Bethlehem had lost its curb appeal. We can almost see this husband and father longing to feed his family, eying the land east of Bethlehem, wondering if the grass might indeed be greener on the other side of the Jordan River.

...went to live for a while... *Ruth 1:1*

Kinda vague. How long did they plan to stay? Did they take a moving van—well, caravan—with all their household goods? Or did they tie spare tunics around their waists and hit the road? This much is clear: they got outta Dodge.

People today regularly move from place to place. Except for the hassle and expense, relocating is a perfectly fine thing to do. But for an Israelite family to abandon their clan and leave the land of God’s blessing and provision was a grave sin.<sup>21</sup> A holy no-no. They weren’t just turning their backs on Bethlehem and its people; they were turning their backs on God. As Warren Wiersbe, a seasoned Bible teacher, put it, this man from Bethlehem “walked by sight and not by faith,”<sup>22</sup> dragging his family down with him.

If their departure from Judah was the first shoe, dropping with a heavy thud, their unseemly destination was the other shoe.

...in the country of Moab. *Ruth 1:1*

Remember our storyteller holding the audience spellbound? The crowd just let out a collective gasp: “Not *Moab!*”

Yup, Moab. The last place—I mean the *very* last place—this family from Judah should’ve headed. The porous soil of Moab might have been good for growing things, and the moist winds from the Mediterranean may have watered the fields and pastures, but Moab was still off-limits for Israelites. Strangers in a strange land, they couldn’t even buy property there.<sup>23</sup> They could only find lodging. And food.

The apostle Paul’s words, written centuries later, suit this foolish family to a *T*: “their god is their stomach.”<sup>24</sup> Couldn’t they trust the God of Israel to provide their next meal? Not this gang. Too hungry for that.



If only we could've stolen their passports, made sure they set off the metal detectors while going through security, or had a TSA agent pull them aside for a pat-down—anything to stop these travelers from crossing the border.

But their stomachs were growling at the thought of all that yummy food.

Can I just say, I get this? *Groan.*

## WHERE'S MAPQUEST WHEN WE NEED IT?

Once the foursome left Bethlehem, we have no record of exactly where in Moab they landed or what route they took to get there. Ancient Moab wasn't very big—roughly twenty-five miles across and thirty-five *or* sixty miles north to south,<sup>25</sup> depending on what year it was and how well the Moabites succeeded in battling their northern neighbors. Check out our map in the front of the book to chart the route this hungry family might have traveled.

The area that Scripture calls “the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho”<sup>26</sup> is open and rolling, irrigated by streams winding through the shallow valleys.<sup>27</sup> Archaeologists have identified several dozen small settlements in Moab.<sup>28</sup> This family of four might have plunked down their luggage anywhere.

There *is* something significant about not knowing where they settled. It wasn't home, was never meant to be home. The precise location doesn't matter, then or now.

They “went to sojourn in the country of Moab” (KJV). 'Nuff said.

## WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT MOAB?

In the story of the prodigal son, the young man “set off for a distant country.”<sup>29</sup> That description fits Moab too: unfamiliar, foreign, dangerous, and a long way from home. A place to be avoided, especially by Israelites.

In later years the prophet Jeremiah would speak of Moab's “overweening pride and conceit, her pride and arrogance and the haughtiness of her heart.”<sup>30</sup> Even worse, Moab trusted in its “deeds and riches”<sup>31</sup> and “defied the LORD.”<sup>32</sup>

What was this religious Israelite family thinking, moving to such a place?

They were thinking about olive oil, grapes, pomegranates, figs, and amber



honey. About wine, lamb, roasted grain, and raisins. About bread, warm from a clay oven. About water, fresh from the streams that flowed from Moab's eastern hills.

They weren't thinking about the people, the Moabites.

But they should've been. Here's why.

### ***Moab was born of (shhh) incest.***

Jesus once cautioned his disciples, "Remember Lot's wife!"<sup>33</sup> Who could forget a woman who turned away from her family—and from God—only to become a pillar of salt?<sup>34</sup> She was a Bad Girl of the Bible, all right, and her two daughters were worse.

When Lot fled from Zoar with his girls and settled in a mountain cave, the older daughter suggested to the younger, "Let's get our father to drink wine and then lie with him and preserve our family line through our father."<sup>35</sup> A really, *really* Bad Girl.

Some nine months later, when the older daughter gave birth to her father's son—yes, her own brother—"she named him Moab; he is the father of the Moabites of today."<sup>36</sup>

### ***Moab had a reputation for promiscuity.***

The women (how I hate to say this!) were one of the main reasons for the country's bad rep. Despite God's warnings not to fraternize with pagans, the men of Israel "began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods."<sup>37</sup> Bet you can guess God's response to the men's apostasy. "And the LORD's anger burned against them."<sup>38</sup>

### ***Moab couldn't even spell Welcome Wagon.***

When the Israelites passed by Moab during their exodus from Egypt, the Moabites refused to feed them. So Moses came down hard on them, saying, "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way."<sup>39</sup>

Yet where did this Israelite family go looking for bread and water?

Moab. Go figure.



*Moab honored every god but the one true God.*

The Moabites worshiped a whole bunch of gods “alongside their principal god, Chemosh.”<sup>40</sup> Ugh. That “vile god of Moab,”<sup>41</sup> to whom they made human sacrifices.<sup>42</sup> No wonder God didn’t want his chosen people mixing it up with Moabites.

Why dwell on the evils that awaited our sojourners in Moab?

Because *Ruth was a Moabite*. A pagan, an idol worshiper, a woman whose family roots were twisted with incest, “a member of a cursed race.”<sup>43</sup> She was hardly the sort of woman Israelite parents would want their sons to marry.

Even so, our God—our utterly amazing, truly forgiving God—chose Ruth as the great-grandmother of King David, firmly placing her in the lineage of Christ. Just as God chose flawed and fallible us to be his children, his heirs.<sup>44</sup>

Think of it! Such love, such grace, such mercy...

Oh bother. Now my eyes are watering. And I’m getting ahead of myself.

First, we need to wind up our back story so we can rejoin Ruth and company in the graveyard. They’re still weeping, yes? Poor dears. Why do I never remember tissues?

## MEET THE FAMILY

The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife’s name Naomi,...

*Ruth 1:2*

Finally we learn their names. The storyteller grabbed our attention with their plight—the famine, the hunger, the flight to Moab—before revealing their identities. We’ve already marked them as people whose faith in God was flagging. Now we’ll see who they really were, since in the ancient Near East, a person’s name often described his or her character.<sup>45</sup>

*Elimelech* means “my God is king.”<sup>46</sup> Clearly his parents expected great things from their boy. When Elimelech married and fathered two sons, he did his folks proud. When he turned his back on Israel, Elimelech’s name didn’t change, but apparently his allegiance did.

His wife, Naomi, was also given a promising name. Depending on whom



you ask, *Naomi* means “pleasant,”<sup>47</sup> “my delight,”<sup>48</sup> “lovely,”<sup>49</sup> “my joy,”<sup>50</sup> or “sweetness.”<sup>51</sup>

A tasty name. Scrumpdiddlyumptious.

Tough to live up to, though. If your name is Joy, you know what I’m talking about.

I wonder how *pleasant* Naomi was about leaving Bethlehem. How much *delight* she felt, bidding her friends farewell. How *sweetly* she regarded her husband when they passed through the town gate, bound for Moab.

Stay in Bethlehem? Risk starving their bodies.

Move to Moab? Risk starving their faith.

Given that choice, many of us would put bodily comfort above spiritual commitment. At least that’s how it looks at my house. I might miss church now and again, but I never miss Sunday dinner.

How does the Lord put up with us? Same way he put up with Naomi, helping her discover, through various trials and errors, the difference between giving lip service to religion and embracing God with her whole heart.

That’s one reason we’re taking this journey; we need to learn the difference too. In a culture where it’s easy to play at church and hard to stem the tide of secularism, we could use a fresh reminder of how much God loves his followers and how far he’s willing to go to redeem us.

Now that we’ve met mom and dad, it’s time to check out the kids.

...and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion.

*Ruth 1:2*

Israelite parents often named their children based on what was happening around the delivery or what sort of future they imagined for them.<sup>52</sup> Either Naomi struggled in childbirth, or her newborn sons were punier than average, because their names were not very encouraging.

*Mahlon* means “weakling,”<sup>53</sup> “mild,”<sup>54</sup> or “sickness” or “infertility.”<sup>55</sup> His brother, Kilion—sometimes spelled *Chilion* (AMP)—was in equally bad shape. Mom and dad called him “pining,”<sup>56</sup> “consumptive,”<sup>57</sup> “sickly,”<sup>58</sup> “perishing,”<sup>59</sup> or “comes to an early end.”<sup>60</sup>

Pitiful. Just pitiful.



I'd be chasing down one of those judges and demanding a name change. But I doubt *chasing* was part of the lads' vocabulary. Nor was running, jumping, swimming, or diving. Mahlon and Kilion were not "strong male figures who could take over their father's role."<sup>61</sup> Instead, they were weakness personified. When I teach the book of Ruth, I call 'em Wimpy and Frumpy.

Maybe they really needed that food in Moab. Some multivitamins might've helped too.

They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. *Ruth 1:2*

Those Ephrathites were likely an aristocratic clan<sup>62</sup> with high social standing.<sup>63</sup> A family of means, then. Three generations later God's Word states, "David was the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse."<sup>64</sup> Same clan, same place.

But we're a long way from that cheery finale.

And they went to Moab and lived there. *Ruth 1:2*

That's not an echo. That's our storyteller driving home a point. *They went to Moab.*

For vacay? No way.

This family "settled" (NCV) in a land where they had no business being. The language and culture of Moab and Israel were similar,<sup>65</sup> but Moab was no place like home. As veteran radio pastor J. Vernon McGee phrased it, "When you get away from God, that's when trouble comes."<sup>66</sup> Preach it, brother.

T-R-O-U-B-L-E

Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left  
with her two sons. *Ruth 1:3*

I doubt Naomi saw this coming, unless—like father, like sons—her husband was sickly as well.

The Bible gives us zero description of their time in Moab and no clue how



long they lived there before death came knocking. We know only this: the patriarch of the family never returned home to Judah.

What happened to the guy? Was it old age? Some nasty plague or foreign disease for which he had no immunity? Or did dwelling where he didn't belong weaken Elimelech's heart?

The rabbis of old saw his death as divine punishment. But however ill-advised Elimelech's departure from Judah was, the book of Ruth doesn't point out any specific wrongdoing worthy of death. Nor did Jesus use the man's demise as a cautionary tale, as he did with Lot's wife: "Remember Naomi's husband!"

We're left with what's recorded in Scripture: Elimelech died. Period.

A surprise to Naomi maybe but not to God. He knew what would happen in Moab, just as he knows the first and last days for each of us: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."<sup>67</sup> I don't want to know precisely when I'll step from this world into the next. But I'm relieved God knows and ordained it so.

Our story has just taken a dramatic shift. In a single verse Naomi became the head of her household. Elimelech is now described as *her* spouse, and Mahlon and Kilion are *her* sons. Even though they were old enough to marry, their care and provision fell on Naomi's grief-bent shoulders.

I wonder why Naomi didn't go back home to Bethlehem? Maybe the famine hadn't lifted in Judah. Maybe she'd grown comfortable in Moab. Maybe the thought of making that long journey without her husband was more than she could bear.

Or maybe her sons had found a reason to stay put. Actually, two reasons.

They married Moabite women,... *Ruth 1:4*

Man, that was fast. The storyteller hardly let us catch our breath, let alone mourn Elimelech, before these young men claimed Moabite wives. No word of their courtship, no description of their wives' appearance or personalities or social standing. Not even a statement of who married whom.

Since fathers were usually the ones who arranged marriages for their sons



and paid a bride price, or *mohar*, to the father-in-law,<sup>68</sup> good old mom must have handled the negotiations and coughed up the cash.

But why would Naomi yoke her Hebrew sons to pagan wives?

Could be she wanted two extra pairs of hands to care for Wimpy and Frumpy. Or more help around the house. Or the comfort of female companionship. Or real estate, if the brides' dowries included land the family could farm.<sup>69</sup>

But what Naomi *definitely* wanted was grandsons to carry on Elimelech's name and to provide for her someday. That meant wives for her sickly sons. Any wives. Even Moabite wives.

Come meet the women wedded to Mahlon and Kilion.

## NAME THAT BRIDE

...one named Orpah and the other Ruth. *Ruth 1:4*

Orpah is mentioned first, probably because she was older. Or because our storyteller wanted to save the best for last, since Orpah has little to recommend her. One scholar translated Orpah's name as "disloyal."<sup>70</sup> Traditionally, her name has been translated as "obstinacy" or "the Stiff-Necked One," but the true meaning remains a mystery. At least if Orpah were stiff necked, she couldn't follow the example of Lot's wife and look back!

Then there's Ruth, whose name has several possible meanings, all of them positive: "lady friend,"<sup>71</sup> "faithful friend,"<sup>72</sup> "to drink one's fill,"<sup>73</sup> or "the act of seeing" or "sight."<sup>74</sup>

Whatever her name means, you won't find another Ruth in the Bible.

## TRAGEDY, PART 2

After they had lived there about ten years,... *Ruth 1:4*

We're talking a rough estimate here, not ten calendar years to the day. A long time, in other words. Long enough that Naomi may have forgotten all about going home to Judah.

Scholars can't agree if the ten-year clock started ticking when the family



arrived in Moabtown or when the sons married. We'll let the PhDs hash out that one. I want to know what these people were doing for a decade. Not a single hour is described. Were their lives that boring?

Meanwhile, a different sort of famine visited the family. The sons of Elimelch married, but no children came. "Instead of empty stomachs, there are empty wombs."<sup>75</sup>

From Naomi's viewpoint that was what mattered. Not the number of years, but the number of grandsons. In those days men were never at fault for failing to produce children; it was the women who were assumed to be infertile.<sup>76</sup> Did Naomi blame her daughters-in-law? Or blame herself for choosing these Moabite women for her sons?

Hearing the phrase "ten years" would've made our ancient Hebrew audience nervous, remembering barren Sarai a few centuries earlier and how she solved *her* infertility problem: "after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband."<sup>77</sup>

Rachel did the very same thing,<sup>78</sup> and so did Leah,<sup>79</sup> with no mention of waiting anything like ten years. That's how desperate women were in this ancient culture that measured a woman's worth by her ability to produce sons.

For the record, Naomi's daughters-in-law aren't called "barren" in Scripture. Instead, Naomi's sons are the ones named "infertility" and "sickly." It seems they couldn't produce life, nor could they hang on to it.

...both Mahlon and Kilion also died,... *Ruth 1:5*

We know. We're looking at their graves right now.

With Naomi's back story all told, we've returned to the scene at hand, eying this heartbroken mother who just buried her only children.

*Oh, Naomi.*

Like their father, her sons have simply expired. No cause of death is given. The Amplified Bible emphasizes they "died also, both of them," which sounds as though they died one right after the other or—perish the thought!—together.

Whether it's because her sons took Moabite brides, or because the young men were weakened by illness, or simply because their time on earth was finished,



the fact is, they're gone. Since the Bible doesn't offer any explanation here, we'll resist the urge to fill in the blanks.

Naomi remains in Moab, suffering "a triple blow to the heart."<sup>80</sup>

...and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

*Ruth 1:5*

Though some translations, like this one, include her name, the word "Naomi" doesn't appear in the Hebrew text. Just "the woman." No wonder. In her faintly lined features, devoid of expression, we can see Naomi has lost her identity. None of her names suits her any longer. Not "pleasant" or "sweetness" or "lovely" or "joy."

Her earthly roles are gone as well. She's no longer a wife, no longer a mother. A woman who has lost her husband is a widow. But "we have no word for a mother whose children die,"<sup>81</sup> just painful adjectives to describe her heart: crushed, broken, shattered.

During my rebellious teen years, I was so convinced my parents had grown weary of me that I once asked my father in a sharply defiant voice, "What if I die before you do?" With unaccustomed tenderness and a sheen in his eyes, he murmured, "That would be the worst day of my life."

I was shocked by his response. And deeply moved.

In typical teenage fashion I never let him see how his answer affected me. But his unexpected revelation took root in my heart: I would be missed, even mourned.

Now, as a mother of two grown children, I cannot imagine how Naomi felt when she became "the woman without."<sup>82</sup> Did she announce her sons' deaths to her neighbors by immediately beginning to wail, the usual practice?<sup>83</sup> You'd have heard my cries halfway to Egypt. Did she close her sons' eyes and give them each a parting kiss, as custom required?<sup>84</sup> I fear I might have begged the townsfolk to wrap my body in a linen cloth and bury me with my children.

All through history women have suffered as Naomi did. In the recent World War II movie *Defiance*, a Russian mother watches in horror as her husband and two sons are shot, one after the other. Devastated, she falls to her knees and pleads with their assassin, "Kill me too!"



We understand. How could any woman recover from such loss? How could she go on?

Yet women do survive. They do go on.

You may know such a woman and admire her strength. You may *be* such a woman who lifts her head each morning and says, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”<sup>85</sup>

When we bury loved ones, we remind ourselves that this life is not the end, that heaven is assured for those who love the Lord Jesus, and that “whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”<sup>86</sup>

But look at our grieving Naomi. She doesn’t have the hope of John 3:16 to comfort her. She thinks this life is everything and beyond death is nothing but a shadowy nether world known as Sheol in Hebrew.<sup>87</sup> The ancient Israelites knew that God was eternal, but when family members died, they were believed to be gone forever since there was “no assurance of life after death in early Israelite history.”<sup>88</sup> In the words of Job, “As a cloud vanishes and is gone, so he who goes down to the grave does not return.”<sup>89</sup> If people expected to live beyond the grave, they had to do so through their sons, who carried on the family name.

## A FINAL FAREWELL

Now we get why having sons was such a big deal and why our Old Testament sisters would do *anything* to help their husbands father a son: that was their definition of eternal life. To Naomi’s way of thinking, she has lost *three* generations of men since she has no hope of grandsons.

Even from this distance we sense her agony as she holds a knife above her right breast, the sharp blade glistening in the sun. No, no, it’s not what you think. She is rending her garment as a token of grief, an ancient custom. We can hear the fabric tearing. A handbreadth, no more.<sup>90</sup> Formal mourning will stretch on for seven days, with neighbors bringing food, then hanging around to eat the best dishes. Some things never change.

Sadly, we can watch our sister Naomi, but we can’t console her. Looks like the other mourners aren’t doing a very good job of it either.

The truth? Only God can help Naomi now. Perhaps no author has phrased



it better than Frances Vander Velde: "God was loving Naomi all the while that He was leading her through the shadows."<sup>91</sup>

That's the lesson Naomi will soon learn and in which we can take solace. She is not alone, will never be alone. Her faith is battered but not abandoned. Her posture may sag, but she's still standing. Her future looks cloudy, yet God can sweep away those clouds with a brush of his hand.

The girl's still got it. Despite all appearances to the contrary, she still has God's steadfast love to cling to. And things will get better for Naomi.

Much-loved commentator Matthew Henry wrote, "When death comes into a family it ought to be improved."<sup>92</sup> I had to read that twice to grasp what he was saying. Since death changes a family, what if the family changed for the better? Not right away, of course, but eventually, when the pain recedes and hope lifts its head once more?

My mother's death from emphysema, late in my twenty-third year, was the beginning of my journey back to the family I'd all but ignored and the Savior I'd almost forgotten. For months following her funeral, I cried every time I got into the car, so deep was my grieving. In the depths of my sorrow, I started asking hard questions for which no answer could be found apart from a Sovereign God.

I ran from the truth, as rebels do, burrowing deeper into my Bad Girl pit, which merely magnified my sense of loss. When friends and lovers proved unfaithful, my family did not. They still embraced me, still loved me.

My cries for help were eventually heard by two new believers who'd just climbed out of their own dark pits and knew where to point my Bad Girl self: straight into our Savior's arms.

I'm not suggesting the Lord ended my mother's earthly life for my benefit. Not for a minute. I simply mean God used the sorrow in my life for his good purpose. And for mine.

He will do the same for our Naomi. She is no longer a wife, no longer a mother, but she's still God's precious daughter. And she's still a mother-in-law, a relationship that will define the rest of her life and rescue her from despair.

As for us, you'll be relieved to hear that the worst of the story is over. No more funerals. No more anguish. (Okay, there's some major whining ahead, but we can handle that.)

Time to brush the sand off our skirts and follow the shuffling crowd home.





*Ruth In Real Life:* SHEILA

“In the beginning I did not feel accepted by my mother-in-law because I had a history, a past, of which she did not approve. The unfortunate day came when her daughter—my sister-in-law—grew very ill and passed away. Standing by my mother-in-law at the funeral home, I promised that, although I could not replace her child, I would always take care of her. Since then we’ve become more like a mother and daughter. I cannot imagine my life without my mother-in-law any more than I can imagine my life without my husband.”





## Coming or Going?

A goatskin tent. Somehow I hadn't imagined Naomi roughing it like this, even if her family did leave Bethlehem in a hurry. Had she known they'd spend a decade here, Naomi might have insisted on leasing a fixer-upper with solid walls. Hanging fabric partitions offer some privacy, though not at the moment with so many neighbors milling about. The funeral was nearly a week ago, yet the grieving continues.

We've claimed two seats—small woven mats—near the open side of the tent, where we can catch a faint breeze. Several mourners stand in clumps, whispering, while others nibble on salty cheese shaped into small, hard cakes.

Most women are wearing some shade of blue with a row of embroidery outlining their modest V necks. It's easy to pick out the well-to-do folk, with their animal-skin sandals and their long hems sweeping against the rough woolen carpet. Garments are held in place with simple bronze pins—the latest Transjordan fashion. In contrast, the laborers are barefoot and wearing shorter robes, which are easily tucked into the girdles around their waists while they're working.<sup>1</sup>

Not far from us sit Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth, their heads bowed. People kneel to speak with the two younger women, all but ignoring Naomi. Losing a son is not unusual in this time and place. But two married sons without issue? Folk stare at our widowed sister as if *cursed* were written across her forehead.

One phrase travels around the tent like a swirl of sand: "Now what?"

Good question.



What would your next move be if you were living in a foreign country and had lost your husband and grown sons? Would you settle there permanently and honor their memories? Or return home to face a vacant house, an empty bank account, and neighbors who might keep their distance?

Even if I was wealthy and that foreign city was Paris, I'd have to go home. Want to go home. Need to go home.

It's clear Naomi's heart is already turning toward Bethlehem. Over the last few days, we've often caught her gazing westward across the Salt Sea, eying the Judean hills. During meals she has seemed distracted and disconnected from those around her. Her sleep has been restless, her nights short, her grief palpable.

All at once a servant darts into the tent and heads straight for Naomi, then whispers something in her ear. The news must be good. Naomi's expression has brightened, and she's reaching for her daughters-in-law, clearly eager to share what she's learned.

We lean forward in anticipation. Of all the words spilling from Naomi's lips, the one that stands out is *Yahweh*.

## EARS TO HEAR

When she heard in Moab that the LORD... *Ruth 1:6*

Hit the Pause button, and let that sink in. If Naomi *heard*, then she must have been listening attentively, her ears still tuned to the Lord's voice even after ten long years away from the Promised Land. Her sons may have married Moabite girls, her neighbors may worship Chemosh, but Naomi's wounded heart still belongs to the Lord, who made very sure his daughter in distant Moab heard the good news: God is in the House of Bread!

...[he] had come to the aid of his people by providing food  
for them... *Ruth 1:6*

God had not only "visited" (KJV); he'd also "come to help" (NCV) and had "blessed his people in Judah by giving them good crops again" (NLT). The shouts of joy in Bethlehem must have startled the birds from their nests. *Food!*



This is the first of two God incidents framing the story. He's always present and often discussed, but here he shows up in a tangible and life-altering way. After enduring years of barrenness across the land, the people of Judah are discovering plump grapes on the vines, clusters of olives nestled in the trees, and barley ripening in their fields. The famine has ended, "not by chance but by God's providential hand."<sup>2</sup>

Naomi's face is radiant as she shares the glad tidings with her daughters-in-law. When she says, "his people," we hear the conviction in her voice. *My people. My God.* Naomi is more than ready to reclaim both her national identity and her personal one.

Interesting that God sent news to Moab rather than sending grapes and olives. Like the prodigal son, Naomi must return home to be nourished. No small message there.

As for the Lord's feeding us, I'll try not to go overboard, but the parallels are...well, delicious.

When God brought his people out of Egypt, he "satisfied them with the bread of heaven."<sup>3</sup> Then God helped his people in Judah by "giving them bread."<sup>4</sup> Later Jesus would tell his followers, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry."<sup>5</sup> Bread is a mainstay of the human diet, the staff of life, filled with the health-giving whole-grain nutrients our bodies need.

The lesson for Naomi and for us couldn't be clearer: we have no life apart from God. We can't even bake our own spiritual bread! It must come from God's hand—like his grace, like his Son, who said, "For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."<sup>6</sup>

Naomi found food to eat in Moab, but the word *bread* is never used to describe it. Moab is malnutrition. Moab is lifelessness. Moab is death. Instinctively, Naomi knows she must quit this town before it kills her.

In the same way and for the same reason, you and I need to leave the Moabs of our own making.

You know what I'm talking about.

Whether it's a place we don't belong or a relationship going in the wrong direction or an activity we're ashamed of or a habit that's strangling us, we need to get out of Moab.

Never mind how we got here. The bus is leaving, sister. Grab your purse.



## GO, NAOMI

...Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home  
from there. *Ruth 1:6*

Love the word “prepared.” Getting ready to get ready—that’s how I roll.

I can’t travel anywhere, not even for a weekend, without creating a packing list. My husband, Mr. Throw-Whatever-in-a-Suitcase, teases me, but we seldom get where we’re going and say, “Oh no! We forgot \_\_\_\_\_.”

The Bible doesn’t give us any details, but you can bet these women will carefully prepare for their journey. Naomi is the expert; she’s traveled this road before. Now that she “got herself together” (MSG), she’s also getting her stuff together: her best tunic, an extra pair of sandals, and her woolen cloak, all tied up in a neat bundle. No point dragging household goods across the Jordan. Hard enough to ford the river without a cooking pot strapped to her back.

As Orpah and Ruth follow her example, we notice how quiet they are. But then, they aren’t returning home, are they? Just the opposite. They’re leaving their families, their friends, and their gods and moving to a foreign country.

Have Naomi’s daughters-in-law ever ventured past Moab’s border? Probably not. Men go abroad for warfare or trade, while women stay home and keep the oil lamps burning. That’s what makes Naomi’s plan so daring. Three women traveling without husbands or sons to protect them and without servants to attend them? Very risky.

Good thing the Lord is their trail guide.

A simple Hebrew word appears in this verse. And the next verse. And the one after that. Plus nine more places—all in the first chapter of Ruth. Depending on the translation, *shubh* (sounds like “shoove”) is rendered in Ruth as “return,” “turn again,” “go on,” “go back,” “brought back,” or “turn back.” I’m all for variety in writing, but when this story was told orally, the same *shubh* spoken twelve times in quick succession would’ve had quite an impact.

Why? Because *shubh* is the main Old Testament word for “turning back to God’s covenant grace and mercy—for repentance, for conversion.”<sup>7</sup> An audience repeatedly hearing *shubh* would’ve gotten the message: go back, go back, go back to God.



I need that message every day, every hour, every minute. When my imagination travels down crooked paths or my less-than-lovely qualities raise their ugly heads, the Holy Spirit gently prods me, *Turn around, Liz*.

As for Naomi, she's turning her back on Moab and its false gods, "leaving behind her the graves of those she loved,"<sup>8</sup> and going home.

With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. *Ruth 1:7*

A light breeze lifts the veils from their foreheads as the three start westward on foot. Patches of wildflowers blanket the fields ahead. In a nearby orchard the fig trees are covered with pale leaves and tiny fruit.<sup>9</sup> Out of respect, Orpah and Ruth follow a step behind Naomi, their leather sandals the same color as the sandy ground beneath them.

I want them to have donkeys. Nice, docile ones with firm backs and steady gaits. But the Bible doesn't mention donkeys in this story. Or horses. Or camels. Or any other four-footed means of transportation. The author Edith Deen thinks they traveled "partly on foot, let us suppose, and partly on donkeys."<sup>10</sup> The word "suppose" gives me pause, especially when another source tells us they journeyed on foot.<sup>11</sup> In any case custom dictated that men rode and women walked.<sup>12</sup>

Guess we'll be walking, then.

If we mean to get out of Moab, we gotta do whatever it takes. Though obedience is seldom an easy road, it helps to know the One leading the way: "It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him."<sup>13</sup>

We've got it: follow, revere, obey, serve, and cling to God.

Desert dwellers often sojourn well into the night since it's cooler.<sup>14</sup> However unsafe that may feel to us twenty-first-century girls, we're setting out on an early spring evening before the first stars appear in the sky.

Neighbors are standing in the doorways of their houses, silent and wary, watching the women depart. The Moabite settlement Naomi has called home has no outer walls, no public buildings, and no fortifications. Only silos for storing grain and a series of low houses built around central courtyards.<sup>15</sup>



As we leave the town behind, the apostle Paul's road trips come to my mind: "I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country..."<sup>16</sup> *Eeek*. All we can do is put one foot in front of the other and pray as we head for the Jordan River, many miles in the distance.

When she last traversed this road, Naomi was at least a decade younger and had two sons and a hubby to handle her luggage. This time she has one small bundle tied securely across her shoulders and two daughters-in-law with the same. Fig cakes and dried meat will have to suffice for food, with fresh water from the stream we're following west.

In our first hour we pass a handful of other travelers, heads bent as they trudge by. All three women have remained dry eyed, although Naomi has a troubled look about her.

She slows her steps before coming to a full stop.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, . . . *Ruth 1:8*

Hold it. We've spent only "a short while on the road" (MSG). What's the problem? And where exactly are we?

One scholar thinks Naomi paused before they descended into the Jordan Valley.<sup>17</sup> Another suggests they were about to ford the Arnon River.<sup>18</sup>

From where I'm standing, it appears we're in the middle of nowhere, the sun is sinking toward the horizon, and Naomi looks as if she's having second thoughts.

## ABOUT FACE

... "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home." *Ruth 1:8*

Her daughters-in-law are wide eyed, as are we. *Go back?*

This is *so* not right. Naomi made Orpah and Ruth gather their worldly goods, bid their friends and relatives farewell, and follow her down this lonely road. Now she's changed her mind? The woman must be menopausal.

If Naomi intended to travel alone, she could've said so before they started





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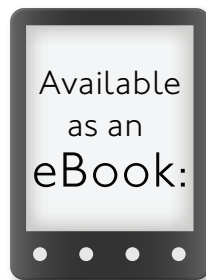
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