

Themes Of Ruth (Part One): Naomi

A Truly Attractive Personality

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Today is the 28th day of the count to Pentecost. It is the fourth Sabbath out of seven that are in that fifty days that we count. And of course, we have 22 days to go. I would like to begin in Leviticus 23 because God there gives a positive command to us to count to Pentecost. God speaks to Moses and says,

Leviticus 23:15 "You shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbath shall be completed."

We see a very positive command here. It is not a "thou shalt not," it is a very positive "you shall." He says here that in this phrasing that He uses, "*You shall* count for yourselves." If you were to look into the Hebrew and know the words that are used there, you would find that this "yourselves" is second person singular. That means He is talking to each person individually to count to Pentecost, not necessarily the ministry. They are supposed to do it too, but He is talking to each individual Israelite or to us now in the church of God.

So evidently God wants us to tick off the days and the weeks in the run-up to Pentecost for reasons personal to each of us. It is not just to count the days to Pentecost. It is for other reasons, too, that are going to mean something to us. We could do this as a matter of course and just do it humdrum—today is the first day, today is the second day, today is the third day—and think nothing of it other than that. Or we could go to another extreme and make it into a kind of a ritual and over time we would lose the significance of what God intends for us to do in counting these fifty days.

The word count in Hebrew is the word *saphar*. It has the same semantic range that it does in English. So when the Hebrews thought of counting, they thought of the same sorts of things that we do. It could mean "to number." We do this counting out the bills we are going to pay somebody for some

service they have done. Or, we could count the jars of peas or beans that are in our pantry. It could mean "count out," as I mentioned, counting out money.

But it can also mean something like "to tell" or "to relate," "to recount." We have that in our vocabulary. We are going to recount a story of what happened to us last summer, or we are going to give an account of events. The Hebrews did the same type of thing in their thinking. They would use this word *count* in these ways.

So in this way, if we look at it from this particular idea, that counting the fifty days to Pentecost becomes a kind of what we might call "a tale of days" or maybe even "a tale of years." It is a story of a period of time, taking it day by day. It is a recounting of certain experiences that we have during that time.

As this word *saphar* is used in the Psalms, it can be then a declaration of the works and wonders of God. So if you find this word in the Psalms, it is usually in the context of David or one of the other psalmist extolling God for the things that He has done—all His works, His miracles. And it is especially this last one that we need to keep in mind as we think about this counting to Pentecost.

If you will remember, most of you (or at least some of you) might have heard the Pentecost sermon I gave a number of years ago, but I suggested there that the fifty days of the count suggests fifty years. I used the day-for-a-year principle. We considered that the average length of the adult life is fifty years. God says, when He was numbering Israel, for them to start numbering at age twenty. That seems to be the age of accountability. So if you started at twenty, and Moses tells us in Psalm 90 that the average length of a human life is seventy years, maybe a little more if we are strong and healthy, we take that seventy years, take off the twenty of our childhood, and we come up with fifty years of when we are an adult. That is just how it is normally in human life.

So I suggested in that sermon that this period of fifty days that we count toward Pentecost parallels a person's period of conversion. Now, not all of us are baptized at twenty and die at seventy. But, you know, in round figures that is how it works out and this is especially true for those of us who have been "born" into the church, born to converted parents. Most of us end up

getting baptized at around twenty years old, maybe a little earlier, maybe a little bit after that. But we started about that time as we become adults, and we have a period of fifty years or so out ahead of us of conversion.

Now, going back to words, in English and in Greek and in Hebrew in a different word. The word, this different word, is not really important. I will tell you what it is. It is *chasahb*. But in English, Greek, and in Hebrew, in this particular word, the idea of counting leads to another concept, and that is of thinking through something, or of considering a matter. And the word "consider" is a good synonym for count in this particular instance.

For example, in James the first chapter, verse two, the apostle says, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials." In that case, he is not saying, number it. He is not saying, count it out. He is saying, "Consider it a joyful thing when you fall into various trials." That word that is used there in James 1:2 is the Greek word *hegeomai*.

Also in I Corinthians 3:7-8 (you probably remember this one), Paul wrote there that he counted or considered all his gains loss for Christ. He said, "I count them as rubbish that I may gain Christ." So what did he do here? He sat down and he thought about his pre-conversion life as opposed to his converted life and all that God had done for him and the great reward that God put in front of us, and he said, "I'm going to count all my previous life before conversion as just trash." It was worth hardly anything to him, as opposed to how much he valued his conversion and what God was doing with him. So he considered this deeply. He made comparisons in his mind. He weighed them, valued them. He saw the relative worth of things, and he came up with a conclusion, a judgment that by accounting, by considering, that his converted life was so much better than all that he seemed to have had before his conversion—when he seemed to be riding high among the Jews there and doing their bidding.

In Psalm 90:12 (back to Moses' psalm), there is the idea of numbering our days. Moses says there in the psalm, "Teach us to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom." And so, in the same way, this is where the *chasahb* comes from in the word number. He is not telling us actually to count them, count our days, although that may come into consideration because we have to understand how much time we may have to go before we

need to get all the things done that we should be doing. But he is also telling us to *consider* our lives, to *consider* our time. Think deeply about these things, how finite our lives, how little time we actually have to do what we need to do. And so in wisdom, use that time wisely.

These are all ideas that come out of this idea of counting or numbering.

Now I believe that a major reason why we count to Pentecost each year is to number or consider our days in terms of our conversion. That period of time, that so-called fifty years that we have, should be the object of our thoughts during this period. The time that we have left, we might call it, when we count the days to Pentecost, we are considering our walk with Christ. We are considering the relationship we have with God. Looking at it from as many ways as we can as we count through this time and appreciate then what has been done for us and how far we have come.

The count to Pentecost begins with the wavesheaf offering. That pictures the acceptance of Christ on our behalf before the Father which, in turn, pictures the beginning of our relationship with the Father. Without Christ going through the veil as He did there and being accepted, there would be no relationship with the Father because He is our Mediator. He is the Intercessor. He is our go between, and it is by His blood that we are allowed to come before the throne of Christ. That is the wavesheaf offering that we are considering there—that He was raised before God and God said, "Of course I'll take You because You're perfect. You deserve this seat at My right hand." And with Him on His coattails, as it were, we can come along under His blood and have a relationship with God.

That is the idea that starts this count to Pentecost, and then it goes through the fifty days ending on the day of Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks. The Feast of Weeks is a feast of harvest. It is a harvest festival where the spring crop has all come in and the people are shouting for joy and feasting because they have had a successful bringing in of the crop.

One of the things that is there in the holy day is another offering, and this is the offering of the wave loaves, two loaves of bread that have been made from what has been harvested. These loaves have leaven in them and they have been baked and finally they are offered before God and He accepts

them. That is the end of this period of time. After all the "baking" has gone on in our lives, where we have gone through various trials, being prepared and perfected and completed to the point where we then can be acceptable before Christ. Even though we contain sin, we are acceptable then because of God's grace. And throughout the whole period between the wavesheaf offering and the wave loaf offering on Pentecost, are all the ups and downs of our lives as Christians—the highs and the lows, the goods and the bads.

Those things are good food for thought during the count to Pentecost, because that is our walk. That is our conversion. That is our period of sanctification, where God is working with us, watching over us, giving us the things that we need so that we can be brought into the image of Jesus Christ. That is what He wants. That is the goal that were being prepared for. If we are doing this counting right, we need most of all, though, to consider ***what God has done for us***. He should always be the central focus of these thoughts. Not on ourselves, necessarily. We will obviously come into those things, those thoughts. But we need to be thinking of what *God* has done, how He has been active in our lives, how He has shown Himself strong in our behalf.

So we need to declare or proclaim mostly to ourselves, because we are the ones that we really have to convince, that all things are going the way they should be. We need to declare and proclaim the multitude of works and wonders God has provided in His lovingkindness and in mercy toward us. We need to reminisce during this time about our journey out of this world to the Kingdom of God, and confess to ourselves and really realize it that, "There but for the grace of God, go I."

Things could have gone terribly different in our lives. We might be just as blind as everybody else about what God is doing. But He has woken us up. He has turned on the light. And not only that, He has been personally involved in our steps to the Kingdom of God. He has been the one, hopefully, that we have been walking beside this whole time, helping us along. We need to look for, during this period of time, and point out to ourselves, make ourselves recognize all the times when we were lost. When we were off the path, when we were heading the entirely wrong direction

during this period of time and God pulled our bacon out of the fire. How many times had we just about strayed, Asaph says in Psalm 73, until we really sought out God, thought about Him, and He pulled us back.

We need to remind ourselves of His many acts of providence. All the times He supplied our need, even times when we were not asking for it and out of the blue, He gave us exactly what we needed. We need to remind ourselves about the interventions and the miracles that have been done on our behalf. I know there have been, we just need to remember them and put them firmly back in mind so that we do not forget them, do not let them go away from us because we need almost daily reminders that God is with us. We need to remember how God has worked out our salvation, our sanctification. And as Paul writes there in Philippians 2:12-13, we need to rededicate ourselves to work with Him in "fear and trembling."

Because God *is* going to work. God is always at work for us. Jesus Christ is always there mediating and intervening, interceding in our behalf. They are always working for us. Question is, are we going to work with Them? Are we going to have the right attitude as is shown by the words fear and trembling there in Philippians 2? Are we going to put our shoulder to the load and lift with Them? Be really in it with Them as a team working on our sanctification?

We also need to reconsider or consider our responses to God during this period. How have we responded to the things He has done? How far have we come from our first efforts when we were converted? Have we changed all that much? What are the improvements that we have made in our walk? Have our attitudes changed? Are you more positive now than you were? Are you more sure about the way things are going, where you are heading? Are our relationships any better than they were? Have we at least been working on our end of the relationships and grown in love toward other people?

Also, in a more general way, can we see any steady progress in our lives? Can we see that there has been real growth? And are we growing at a steady rate or is it by fits and starts and ups and downs and backwards and forwards? I am not saying any of those things are wrong, but it may be

helpful to smooth things out a bit, and probably the reason why there are fits and starts and backwards and forwards and all those other things, is our own reactions to what is going on.

But again, most of all, the time should be used to recognize the work of God in our lives. He is the one that is steering the boat. He is at the helm. How has *He*, you have to ask yourself, molded, shaped, directed, guided, tuned, and fine tuned us? It is good to remember those things. Remember how we were and what helped to transform us into what we are now. Are we coming into the image of Jesus Christ? Are we becoming more like His Son? Is the Holy Spirit working in us? Can we see ourselves actually becoming more like God? Are we still holding on to our carnality?

I know we do something like this before Passover, but this one, this count to Pentecost, has a slightly different edge to it. Because it is, I think, even more focused on God and His work with us rather than before Passover, we are looking specifically at like what we see in II Corinthians 13—whether we are in the faith, we are examining ourselves, and that sort of thing. But this is directed toward our actual *growth* in the faith.

So if we do this every year, if we make it part of our study, our meditation and such between the wavesheaf offering and the day of Pentecost, it will go a long way to making sure that we never cease to see God at work in our lives. It will help us not forget how much He has invested His time and efforts in preparing us for eternal life in His Kingdom. And we will also be very grateful by seeing the proofs of how much He wants us there with Him. If we are looking to see God at work in our lives during this time and how He is bringing us to harvest, then we will be much more grateful to Him for the work that He has done.

Now in this vein then, with this as a background, I want to draw our attention to the only book in the Bible that is directly connected to this period of time—the period of the early harvest—and that is the book of Ruth. Ruth is one of the *Megilloth*, the five festival scrolls in the Old Testament that are linked to the various feasts or different times of the year. Song of Solomon is one of them. That is for Passover. The book of Ruth for Pentecost, the book of Lamentations for the Ninth of AB and the Destruction of the Temple. There is Ecclesiastes that has to do with the fall feast, specifically the Feast

of Tabernacles, and the book of Esther, which speaks of the time of Purim, which is normally in about February of our year.

But these five festival scrolls are very important for us to understand these times, and they have got a lot in them that has to do with things that we should be thinking about during this time.

Now, Ruth has a particular set of themes and messages that apply to us as we prepare for God's first harvest, His major harvest of the firstfruits. I think it is good to review it from time to time. Now, ten years ago, I gave a sermon called "Boaz and Pentecost," in which I focused, obviously, on Boaz and the things we can learn from him during this time, and believe it or not, twenty-two years ago I gave a sermon called "Pentecost and the Book of Ruth." That is hard to believe. So I think it is about time again to check into the book of Ruth.

I do not want to rehash those sermons. Not at all. I am not going to focus on Boaz or Ruth this time, but I instead want to develop some themes from the material in Ruth that will give us something to think about as we go on this count toward Pentecost. Today's message will focus on Naomi. Naomi is often the forgotten character in Ruth, but she displays attitudes that are common among Christians as we battle through life, as we try to live the way that God wants us to. I think there is a lot that we can learn. So if you will turn with me to the book of Ruth. You could jump right over Ruth. It is only a few pages long, four little chapters. You can read it in about 15 minutes.

Ruth 1:1-2 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 sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 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.

Nobody actually knows who the author of Ruth was. Tradition says that it was Samuel. At one time I thought that might be likely. But now that I think about it more I think it is probably less likely. He died very early, I think actually, before David even became king. So the idea that David was king

that appears in the book of Ruth at the end would have been something that he was not truly aware of. Although he could have been by faith because he is the one who had anointed him there in Bethlehem at the house of Jesse.

But if you want to know who I think it is, I think we can. If it is a biblical character that we know, there are two that I think are pretty good candidates. The first is Solomon because he would have been talking about his great-great-grandmother and father, and his great-great-grandmother, Naomi. The other one is a man, a prophet of God who could tell a pretty good story. He got David to repent by telling a story. His name is Nathan. Either one of those, I think, would be a good candidate as an author of the book of Ruth. But like I said, nobody knows. It is just a guess.

But the author here, whoever it is, sets the scene rather efficiently. He puts it out right there, giving you the who, what, when, and where. Like he is writing a newspaper article. So he tells you that it comes to pass there in the days of the judges. So we know the period. We know who it was. That this was Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, his two sons. They are Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah, just as a kind of toss-out fact. Most scholars think that when that term Ephrathites appears in situations like this where it is mentioned that they are Ephrathites of Bethlehem, it means that they were like the old blood. They were the aristocrats. They were a very prominent family in Bethlehem, Judah. And this family, even though they were prominent, had pulled up stakes and went to Moab because of a famine in the land. So those are the quick facts that we get from these first two verses.

Like it says, it was during the time of the judges and there was a famine. There were likely several famines during the period of the judges. But the most likely time that this occurred, we think, is about the time of Gideon. Remember, there was a famine in the land during the time of Gideon, and what grain he had he had to thresh in the wine press. But if you do the math, it comes out that Gideon's time was about a hundred years before David, and for great grandparents down to their great grandchildren it is usually about eighty or a hundred years.

So the time between Ruth and Boaz and David would be about eighty to a hundred or a little bit more years, depending on how people got married during that time. Normally they got married pretty early, but let us say they

got married at twenty. You know, you have all those generations, four generations at twenty years. That is eighty years. That is your lower end. And if anybody did not get married quite as early or in this case, you have David, who was at least the ninth child of Jesse. We know of eight sons and one daughter, and David seems to have been the baby. So by the time you get to David, there is several years down the line, so that could be ninety or a hundred years, depending how old Jesse was when David was born. It could be right about that time. So we are saying about the time of Gideon, during the time of the judges.

Now the famine is given as the reason for Elimelech uprooting his family to migrate to Moab. We would call this in creative writing classes, "the inciting incident" that makes the rest of the story happen. But, you remember, moving somewhere because of famine was something that happened quite often in Scripture. Abraham went to Egypt or to Philistia one time each. Did not Isaac go to Philistia and have trouble with Abimelech? Abraham had a trouble with Abimelech and with the Pharaoh in Egypt. Let us see, who else here? We have Jeroboam when he was having trouble with with Solomon, he fled to Egypt. And what trouble came out of that!

We also had Elijah fleeing from Jezebel. He did not go to Egypt, he went to Mount Sinai. And if you read that story carefully of what God told him, that did not end up very good for him either, because he lost his job. He had kind of lost faith in God's ability to protect him. That is why he went to Sinai. He had also lost sight of the 7,000 that had not bowed their knee to Baal, so that did not come out very well.

And here we have Elimelech taking his family to Moab during a famine. He is repeating the old mistakes. You know, there are only two times in the Bible that I could remember that leaving the Promised Land was actually a good thing, that it worked out.

The first one in history was when Joseph invited Jacob down to Egypt and they saved him from the famine and saved actually the whole nation of Israel at that time. Of course, things did not go very well after that first generation or so died, and then suddenly they were slaves in Egypt.

But the second time that it actually worked to go down to Egypt was when Joseph and Mary took Jesus down. That was because an angel came to them and said, "Get out of here. Herod wants your Son's life." So at that time it worked.

But every other time, other than those two times, leaving a place because of famine, leaving the Promised Land because of famine is a bad idea. Bad things end up happening, and here we have Elimelech repeating the old mistakes. So leaving Bethlehem was a bad idea for Elimelech and his family, and we see what happened as we go through.

There is a bit of irony here. Elimelech in Hebrew means "God is king" or "God is sovereign," which is actually, as it said here right in the second verse, the main theme of the book. God is King, and we will probably get to that in another sermon, this this idea of God's sovereignty in the book of Ruth. But Elimelech, ironically, does not seem to act as if God is sovereign, like He has got his hands on the wheel and He is taking His people in the right direction. The author here, whoever it was, may be hinting that Elimelech did not consider God when he made this decision. That all he saw was the famine. He did not see God and what God was doing. He just saw that there was a famine and he said, "Let's go to Moab."

Now, why did he go to Moab of all places? Well, why he did that is uncertain, but I am going to name drop here. Charles Whitaker did some research several years ago and he came up with the idea that there may have been a small colony of Jews in Moab at the time. Now you have to dig for this and I am not going to give you all the proof. But, he may have been thinking that, "Hey, Moab is not in a severe famine like we are. We could go to Moab. There'll be people there that we can live with it that we know and things will be okay and once the famine's gone, then we will come back here to Bethlehem." Obviously, he thought that his family would fare better there than sticking it out through the famine. But as we can see by what happens in the book of Ruth, his decision did not pan out to be a good one. It was actually a very fatal decision.

Now let us think about this. Remember what the author told us in the very first thing that he said, that this happened during the time of the judges. If

you will go back one verse to Judges the 21st chapter and the 25th verse, it is written there, "In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The very next verse that you read, if you read the Bible straight through is, "Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land."

I think this is a pretty good indication, because the book of Ruth has always been stuck at the end of the book of Judges, that from the very beginning God wanted these verses to go side-by-side for us to understand that what Elimelech did was repeating the problem, the mistake of many Israelites during the time of the judges. They just did what they wanted to do, and they did not consider God in their decision making. So perhaps we can assume that Elimelech was doing just this. He did what was right in his own eyes.

Remember God had brought Israel out of Egypt with all those miracles, all that providence through the wilderness, and He had planted them in the Promised Land. This is your land forever. Here you will stay and we have Elimelech deciding he is going to go. Elimelech decides to forsake it when the going got just a little bit rough. If nothing else, it was simply a bad decision because when Naomi returns with Ruth to Bethlehem, you notice there is never any word about the famine. It had been ten years, but the people of Bethlehem seemed pretty happy and prosperous. But they made it through the famine just fine.

All the old families were there. Remember when Naomi comes back into town, all the ladies who knew her from ten years before say, "Is this Naomi?" And they go out and hug her and congratulate for coming back and want to know her story. They were still there. They made it through the famine okay. Those people who stayed in the Promised Land and dependent on God to help them through the famine but not Elimelech's family. They went away.

Now there is one other thing I want to mention about the villagers there in Bethlehem and that is from the indications we get sprinkled through the book is that they were quite godly people. They seemed to know all the laws, all the little legal matters. They, like with Boaz, greet each other with,

"The Lord be with you" and "The Lord bless you" and those sorts of things. They had God on their mind. But juxtaposed to this is Elimelech, who leaves during the famine, not seeming to consider God.

Ruth 1:3 [they are in Moab] Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died.

That is interesting. Normally, a wife is said to be her husband's wife, but in this case we have Elimelech being called Naomi's husband, which gives you a pretty good indication of their relative character. That Naomi's character was better than Elimelech's. It is just a little hint that is thrown in here that Naomi is the one that we need to focus on.

Ruth 1:3-5 Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. Now they took wives of the women of Moab [the sons did]: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. [This is probably the full length of their sojourn in Moab, ten years, not necessarily the length of their marriage, but the whole time from Elimelech taking them from Bethlehem to when they return.] Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.

It is an interesting way to put it. We say that, but I think there is more to it. The males of this family are falling dead, right and left. First Elimelech goes, and then the two sons. Now Mahlon and Chilion mean weak or sickly, and frail or pining, respectively. So you have weakling and, let us call him frailing, frail guy. You have you have a sick one and you have a frail one, one that would be blown over in a stiff wind. Both of these names are quite negative, as you can see. From the way they are named, they seem to have been doomed to an early death right from the beginning.

However, they did marry for a time, both to Moabite girls. Orpah which means neck or something having to do with the neck. And a lot of people think that it may imply being stiff-necked or obstinate. The other idea is that it means that she had thick hair, but I do not know what that has to do with anything. But most people think that it has something to do with being stiff-necked or obstinate. Ruth means one of two things: either friend or

refreshment, a very positive meaning to her name. Now Naomi means pleasant. Two very positive names in our main characters here—Ruth and Naomi. So with all these deaths that occur and Orpah heading back to Moab, only the people with positive names remain.

Truly, as it said here of Naomi, she and Ruth survived her husband and sons and all their negative baggage. They lived through a time of trial during these ten years, and the men died and these strong women survived. They were survivors. Naomi was an enduring person. She seemed to be able to take anything and come out the other end of it. Now this is said twice: in verse 3, that she was left, she was the one that remained, and also there in verse 5, when it says she survived her two sons.

It seems to be an idea that the writer wants us to understand. That Naomi is a person who is going to struggle during all the times of trial, but she sees it through. She survives. She comes out on top in the end. So we are getting a little bit of a foretaste of the end of the book by being told here that Naomi is the one that wins. You know, she is the one that is the last one standing, and things seemed to work out right for her. But it is because of her attitude. It is because of her character, not just because she is strong-boned and healthy. She was able to survive these things because she applied herself properly to these trials.

So she outlasted the men in her family. She was not the kind to give up, to succumb, to despair at all, or to curse God and die, like Job's wife said. She was not that kind of woman. She was going to see this through. She was going to try to make the most of it. She was not like the men of her family who were weak and poor decision-makers. She was a good decision-maker. She thought things through. Sometimes she did not come up with all the right answers, but she was a woman who most of us would be very glad to have as a friend who could give good counsel and would be there beside you to help you through whatever it was that you were faced with.

So with no one to tell her any differently, all her men out of her life, who could say, "no, we're not going to do this," she returns to Bethlehem. Now, this is interesting. She returns to Bethlehem and does anybody know what Bethlehem means? House of Bread. Now we understand something. When you are in a famine, why would you leave a house of bread? So Elimelech

makes this poor decision of leaving the House of Bread during a famine and when he is out of the way, Naomi decides to return to the House of Bread, which would have been the right decision in the first place to stay there. But she returns even after all of this.

So we find her making good decisions. She is going back toward God, when she had been taken out of the way by her husband and her sons. She is one that is always going to return to what is right and good.

Let us pick up this story. We are going to read quite a bit here. Pretty much the rest of the chapter because we get a good glimpse of Naomi here.

Ruth 1:6-18 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. 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. [Funny that she calls them the dead, not my dear husband and sons. It is just "the dead."] The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 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, even 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!" Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 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." When she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

That sounds funny. "You're going to come with me. Fine! I'm not talking to you anymore." That is what it says in the Hebrew, but it means she decided not to press the point anymore and said, "Come on."

This passage gives us pretty good insight into Naomi's character. Most of it is good, very good. But she could be a pessimist at times. That is one of her faults. And she seems to have a limited view of God's character and purpose for her and for humanity. And, you could say, just about everybody does. Everybody has a very limited space in which they think. She was not thinking much beyond her present circumstances, and that was a fault. She should have understood God a little bit better and understood what He was doing with her, but we would not have a story if she had. So here we can understand, learn a few things from what Naomi went through.

On the good side, she has an attractive personality, and that attractive personality engenders *loyalty*. Her daughters-in-law loved her. Now is that not strange? It is kind of a caricature, but it seems like every woman hates her mother-in-law. But in Ruth's and Orpah's case, they *loved* her. They wanted to stay with her. They thought more of her than their own parents. They were willing to go into a foreign land, into a land that they did not know at all in order to stay with her. Ruth *clings* to her. It is almost like, "You're not going to step further unless you take me with you." Kind of reminds you of Jacob's personality, wanting the blessing from the angel that he was fighting. But Ruth, in the same way, clings to Naomi and does not want to be persuaded at all to leave.

In fact, in her speech there, one of the most famous lines out of the book of Ruth, she has been so impressed by Naomi that she tends to stay with her for the rest of her life and even to be buried with her in death. She never wants to be parted from her mother-in-law. So what we can see from this is that Naomi had been such a good witness of God, because obviously Ruth mentions that Naomi's God is going to be her God. Naomi had been such a

good witness of God's way of life that Ruth wants to join her in worshipping her God. If your God produced somebody like you, I want to be a worshipper of your God.

Naomi was a pleasant gem of a woman. She was a joy to be around. That is what her name meant, pleasant. She was a person you would always welcome in because she was such a good woman and one that everybody wanted to be her friend.

Notice her first words in the text because they are very significant in verses 8-9 because they tell us about her character. She says here, "Go, return each to her mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." So after entreating them to return to their families, signifying that she thought of their welfare before her own, she invokes the Lord in a blessing upon them, and she asked Him to give them two gifts. It is hard to see in the English. It would be very obvious in Hebrew. But she asked for God to give them, *hesed*, which is that covenant loyalty or lovingkindness that comes through the covenant with God, a relationship with God, a formalized relationship with God.

So she is asking this upon them, two Moabite Gentile women, whom God says in the Pentateuch should never be even to the tenth generation allowed into the family of Israel. She goes far beyond what a normal Israelite would think about a person coming into the covenant. She wishes God's blessing on them.

The second thing that she asks is to give them rest. Now, this is not Shabbat. This is *nuach*, the *nuach* rest. It is actually the word *menuchah* but it is a form of *nuach*, and it means peace and security and well being. The kind that only God can give, that kind of rest that we are looking forward to in the Kingdom of God—that *nuach* form of rest.

So we can take two major traits of Naomi's character from these words. First she put others ahead of herself. This is the reason why everybody loved her. She acted toward people what we in the church would call agape love. She thought of them before herself. She tried to make the best for them before she tried to help herself. It was a kind of agape love.

The second thing is that God was real to her. In invoking the blessing upon them she was saying something that she truly believed He would do. She saw God at work in her life, and she believed that He would work in these girls' lives, too, because that is how God is. That is how he had worked with her. And even if they were Gentiles and not part of the covenant, He would be with them, He would help them.

Last of all from this section, in her speech about not having a husband and not waiting for her to have another son, that would be another 15, 18, 20 years or more, we also see that Naomi was reasonable and logical. She thought things through. "Look, ladies, I'm not married. And even if I were married and had a son as soon as I could, you still shouldn't wait here. You have a life to live. You need to go and find husbands for yourself."

She thought the whole thing through, and she decided that what was best for them as Gentiles, as Moabites, would be to go back to their father's house and find husbands their own age so they would not have to wait so long for them to be married because, under the Levirate way of how they dealt with the death of these sons, it was the next son that was supposed to have a child to replace the father so that all the the inheritance would be passed down. And so she said, "This is really impossible. You guys are going to be old by the time I have another son. Just go back to your families there in Moab, and that will be the best thing for you."

So what we see here in a nutshell on this point is that Naomi possessed the rarest of attributes: common sense. She was a good, sensible woman, and she gave good, sensible reasons why the girls should return home to Moab. She did not want the lonely and difficult circumstances that they would probably face in Bethlehem for them. It would be better, their chances were better to have a fulfilling life among their own people back in Moab.

So what we saw here, I will just repeat very quickly. 1) She has an attractive personality that engenders loyalty. 2) She put others before herself with that kind of agape love that she gave toward everyone. 3) God was real to her. She expected Him to bless. And, 4) she was logical, reasonable. She had common sense. Those are all great qualities to have.

Let us pull something out of verse 13 here, the final little bit from the end of the verse. She says, "No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." Now let us drop down to verse 19. This was after Ruth's speech.

Ruth 1:19-21 Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" 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?"

In this opening chapter, we see that the writer has also given us Naomi's shortcomings. We saw the things that were good about her and now we see a few things that are not quite so good. And I think this is where we can learn the most about ourselves in Naomi's shortcomings because we have some of these same shortcomings.

After all her goodness and kindness to her daughters-in-law, wishing God's blessing on them, she looks at her own situation. She looks inward and concludes that God is her enemy. That is what it really says there at the end of verse 13, "that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." This is a military term in which the hand of the Lord would go out against Edom or against Moab. It was where He went to fight for Israel, against their enemies. She takes this and said, no, He has turned His hand against her and she has become His enemy.

So she is looking at her own particular situation and thinking that God has cursed her, that God is not going to be kind and have that covenant loyalty toward her. It is a blind spot for her. She has been through a lot, and she is looking at her present situation and saying it is obvious, to her, that God had decided to curse her rather than bless her. She also says, there in verse 21 at the end, "The Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted

me." These are both legal terms. You see God here as judge in this. She says the Almighty, Shaddai. You have heard of El Shaddai? Well, this is the word Shaddai by itself. Not God Almighty, but just Almighty.

I should take a moment to explain that Shaddai really does not mean "Almighty" as we think of it. It is not the Lord of hosts that Shaddai means. It actually means something more along the lines of "the bountiful one" or "the provident one." There is great power there. But it is not the power of a military commander or of a strongman in terms of how he can wield a sword or an ax or a spear. This is the kind of power of being able to supply what is good and what is needful. There is great power there so when it says El Shaddai, it means God who could supply all my needs because He is Almighty. He has all the power in the world to give me what I need. So we call Him El Shaddai—God Almighty.

But she says that Shaddai, this all-powerful bountiful One, has dealt bitterly with her. That is why she changed her name to Mara, because Mara means bitter. Here we had this beautiful, pleasant woman leaving Bethlehem, and she comes back as this bitter woman because of the things that she has gone through, and she blames God for it. He is the one that has done this.

These terms that she uses here at the end of verse 21 where it says "testified against me" and "afflicted me" are terms that would be used in a courtroom. The afflicted part does not sound like it would be a judicial type of thing. That would be the bad thing that He has done. But really, what it means is, He has testified against me. He has been the one who has come forth as the witness against her. Then the second one is that the Almighty has pronounced evil sentence against me. So He was the witness and He was also the judge who pronounced the sentence. She says, "Everything's been against me. I had no way to testify on my own behalf. Even if I had tried God would have made this bitter thing happen." And so she is blaming God for this.

Like I said, she was sure that she was under a curse and very much out of favor with God. His will, in her mind, was set against her. And the rest of the book of Ruth is God proving that that is not the case, that she had this wrong. She had it *very* wrong. And I say this because we get into attitudes like this, too, even the best of us. Let us go back to Exodus 5.

Exodus 5:22 So Moses returned to the Lord [This is after his first audience with Pharaoh.] and said, "Lord, why have You brought trouble on this people? Why is it You have sent me?"

Here was a similar thing where God had promised him to be able to go before the throne of Pharaoh and get them out of Egypt. Instead, what does he get? Well, the waters get turned to blood, you know, that sort of thing, and Pharaoh's heart was made stubborn against him. So Moses questions God's purpose even before things had really gotten started.

There is another one in Numbers 11. Moses seemed to have this trouble, and I do not blame him. He had to deal with the Israelites. This one is after the people complain. They are always complaining, but he says here,

Numbers 11:11 Moses said to the Lord, "Why have You afflicted Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all these people on me?"

This is the same thing. The word "afflicted" here, I believe, is the same word that is back there in Ruth 1 where, like Naomi, he is saying I have been afflicted by the Lord. Woe is me. Just like Naomi did. And there is another one in I Kings 17:20 where Elijah says basically the same thing while he is complaining to God there at Mount Sinai.

All of these are instances of God "afflicting" (and I put that in quotes) His people and Moses and Elijah, and as we saw Naomi, misunderstand His larger purposes. They think that what they are going through at the time, their present circumstances, are an *end* of God's judgment process when in fact the present situation is only a step in a much longer-range plan to bring blessings and progress and development to His purposes.

How often do we take a setback as God's final judgment? How often do we take a circumstance as God's final word on something as if time is going to stop right now and God cannot do anything to turn things around in the next days, months, or what have you. When we do this, this is called jumping the gun on God. This is also, which is far worse, prejudging God, judging His motives as if His design was to curse us. We have to be very careful that we

do not slip into this kind of short-sightedness and think that just because we are having troubles now that something wonderful cannot be produced out of it.

Hey, God makes lemonade from lemons. We have heard that for years. We just need to wait. We need to be patient because God always, always, I say that purposefully, always works toward good. Even His afflictions are good. Let us just pick one out here.

Psalm 119:67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.

Psalm 119:71 It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.

Psalm 119:75 I know O Lord, that Your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.

See, that is a whole different perspective. Someone like the author of Psalm 119 could have given Naomi a pretty good lesson. "Hey, look, God afflicted me and brought me through it and when I thought about it and I look back upon it, I saw that He was doing this to teach me something. And so you need to be patient, Naomi, and not jump the gun on God."

This is why we must *endure* with God. We have to see things through. Now remember, Naomi is a survivor and she does that. But she does have this period of time here when she returns to Bethlehem, where she thinks that everything is against her, and she does not know what is coming. She does get down, but she does not let it keep her down.

We need to make sure that we do not get into the same attitude of bitterness against God. I mean, there are times when we really feel like we are being put upon, but we have to make sure that we charge through that as best we can. So we do not let it become a root of bitterness, as it says there in Hebrews the 12th chapter.