

Brought Home Again to Bethlehem

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Bible Text: Ruth 1:21

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The Scripture reading for this morning is from the book of Ruth, chapter 1. Ruth 1, beginning in verse 1.

1 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 Bethlehemjudah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. 2 And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehemjudah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there. 3 And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons. 4 And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years. 5 And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.

6 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 how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread. 7 Wherefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters in law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah. 8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me. 9 The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept. 10 And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people. 11 And Naomi said, Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? 12 Turn again, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have an husband. If I should say, I have hope, if I should have an husband also to night, and should also bear sons; 13 Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands? nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD is gone out against me. 14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her. 15 And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and

unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law. 16 And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: 17 Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. 18 When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

19 So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi? 20 And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me? 22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.

Here ends the reading of God's holy Word.

Dear congregation, in Jeremiah 50, we read these words, "In those days, and in that time, saith the LORD, the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together, going and weeping: they shall go, and seek the LORD their God. They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the LORD in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten. My people hath been lost sheep: their shepherds have caused them to go astray, they have turned them away on the mountains: they have gone from mountain to hill, they have forgotten their restingplace." These words were spoken to a people who had left the Lord. They had as this verse said, forgotten their restingplace. Their wandering heart had taken them far from home and yet the Lord out of reasons known only to himself, made them restless until they found their restingplace once again. That is the same grace that we need as we move once again, in our commemoration of the Lord's coming. We need that restingplace, don't we, for the soul of our feet. That place where our hearts and lives can find that ultimate rest that the world cannot afford us.

When is the last time you truly were in Bethlehem? Well, whenever that was, and whether it has ever been true for yourself, we hope that in God's providence and grace, Bethlehem and the way to Bethlehem would be precious to you, that you would join returning sinners everywhere as they face home once again by the grace of God in their hearts.

Our theme with God's help this morning is "Brought Home Again to Bethlehem." The words of our text are found in the chapter that was read to you but let me just read verse 21 at this time, "I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty

hath afflicted me?" Our theme with God's help is "Brought Home Again to Bethlehem." We see first of all, the rebellion that takes us away from Bethlehem. Secondly, the repentance that turns us back to Bethlehem. And finally, the mercy that lies behind Bethlehem. Brought home again to Bethlehem: the rebellion that takes us away; the repentance that brings us back; and the mercy that lies behind Bethlehem.

First of all, the rebellion that takes us away from Bethlehem. This chapter which was read in your hearing is a chapter that speaks of one of the families in Israel during the times of the judges: Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon and Chilion. This was a family from the tribe of Judah and they had been given an inheritance in the land of Israel in or around Bethlehem. This was a few miles from Jerusalem where later the temple would stand. It's not there yet. The sanctuary in Shiloh was about 30 miles from Bethlehem. Bethlehem means "house of bread," and it's most likely because this area was a very fertile area. We would say today it was the bread basket of the whole region. However, during these days, there's no bread in this basket now. You see, there is a famine in the land we're told in the first verse of our chapter and indeed, the Lord had threatened to send famines as a token of his displeasure when the people had forsaken him and his covenant as they had done. In fact, children, if you go back to the previous book, the book of Judges, the very last verse tells you what the situation was with respect to the people of Israel, "Everyone did what was right in their own eyes." They had cast off the Lord's laws and commandments, his covenant. They had cast off the fear of the Lord and as a result, the Lord was sending threatenings and warnings, calls really to the people to come back to him, "Turn ye. Turn ye. For why will you die?"

So the Lord withheld the rain. The crops would wither before the people's eyes. When harvest time was come, the fields would be empty. The Lord was withholding his blessing. And the people should have known it that when these things happen this way, they are warnings from the Lord and he says elsewhere in his Scriptures that, "If my people which are called by my name will humble themselves and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways," then the Lord would heal his people's land. But in our chapter, we have Elimelech finding an easier and a quicker solution than to seek the Lord and to wait upon him. "Moab," he tells Naomi one day, "Let's move to Moab. Moab was a neighboring country and it represented to Israel the world. Israel had passed through Moab on their way to the Promised Land and Moab had offered them no help. In fact, Moab had become a snare to the people of Israel. You can read about it with Baalam and Balak. It had brought the people into gross sin. Yet, Elimelech decides that Moab will be best for him and for his family. Maybe he excused it by saying, "Well, it will just be a year or two or a little time." But he should have been more careful, shouldn't he have? Especially with teenage boys, Mahlon and Chilion. They would end up finding wives there in this far country.

Well, congregation, before we sit in judgment on Elimelech, let's think about our own Moab's. Who here can say that Moab has no draw, no pull on our hearts? Don't you find it during this season even? That the world pulls at us, seeks to draw us into its ways and habits and to the things which it prizes. In fact, we don't even need to get up and leave Grand Rapids or this area to go to Moab, Moab comes to us each and every day and

Moab has a hook in our very hearts. Moab is that close. When we look over the fields of our lives, dear congregation, what must we confess before the Lord? When we take stock of the fields of the church of our day, the fields of spiritual life in our families? Oh, we can be thankful for certain blessings but must we not confess that the Lord also has sent many tokens of his displeasure upon churches of our day? Are things so fruitful in Zion at the present? Where are the days when people sought the Lord earnestly, taking hold of each other saying, "We ought to seek the Lord, cast off our idols, return to him once again." Can we not say that the Lord in many ways is bringing to America and to the church in America and to all of us in a certain sense when we're honest? He's showing us our empty fields as tokens of his just displeasure with us because of our wandering hearts, because of our love for Moab.

What then is the sentiment of our hearts? Is it truly to seek the Lord? To turn from our wicked ways and seek him until he will heal our land once again? Until he will return the years that the locust have eaten? Until he will once again rain down rain from heaven and give us true spiritual harvest in our land and nation, in the church which is called after his name? In our own lives as well? Or are we weary of finding that secret place to beseech the Lord once again to come? Do we have an easier solution? Moab. Moab. So much in Moab. One authors said it this way, "It is better to stay in the empty fields that God is going to fill than to go to full fields that God is going to empty." It is better to stay in empty fields that God is going to fill than to go to full fields that God is going to empty. Dear friends, that is exactly what happened in Elimelech's life, the Lord would empty this family's life.

Naomi says it in verse 21, "I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty." First, there was Elimelech's funeral. Then Mahlon and Chilion's funeral. You read these haunting words and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband. These losses were providential chastisements of the Lord in the life of Naomi. We don't know exactly how she processed them all immediately at least, but at some point, this woman took the first step back to Bethlehem. Congregation, the long journey back to God begins with that first step when we face up to the fact that we have departed from the Lord. When God calls in providence, when his chastising hand upon us brings us to that place where we realize that we have been on the greatest detour imaginable away from the Lord, away from the Father's house, when his chastisements sink into our heart and soul and are blessed by the Spirit, when they don't simply just render us bitter but when we find in our bitterness that drawing power of Bethlehem once again which we find in the life of Naomi as we see in the second point: the repentance which brings her back, we read these wonderful words in verse 6, "Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab." Naomi here is coming like the prodigal of whom we read in Luke 15, who is in that faraway country and comes to himself and says, "The servants of my father have bread enough and to spare and I perish with hunger." What was it for Naomi that brought her to that point, that first step? Was it nostalgia for old times and old acquaintances and friends? Was it the loneliness that she was facing every day? The empty place staring her in the face? Was she perhaps afraid that she might be next? The Lord had taken her husband, her two sons.

Well, Ruth 1:6b says something very significant, "for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread." She had heard. Indeed there was this work of the Lord in her life, these chastisements in her life that were harrowing up the soil of her soul. But it wasn't just that. It wasn't just the difficulties that she was facing but in the midst of these providential calls in her life, there was something that the Lord sent into her life. Good tidings from a far country can be like medicine to the sin-sick soul. She receives tidings that the Lord, Jehovah, the faithful covenant keeping God, had visited his people in giving them bread. We don't know how this report came to her. We don't know if someone who was traveling somehow stopped in at Naomi one day and said, "Did you hear? Bethlehem, that empty breadbasket is filled again?" We don't know how it came to her but she heard. Wherever God works, he sends reports. "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God. How shall they hear without a preacher?" Somehow Naomi heard and like the prodigal in that faraway country, her mind turns to the father's house. Bread in the father's house. Bread enough and to spare. You see, as Paul says in Romans 2, it's the goodness of the Lord that leadeth to repentance not to be repented of. Oh indeed, there are those calls, there are those providences, there are those difficulties, there is that harrowing work in our souls but in it all, there is that goodness, "Bread enough and to spare and I perish with hunger."

And the Lord blesses this report to the heart of Naomi. She takes encouragement from it. She also realizes something of her folly in having left the house of bread and yet she doesn't just simply pine away in the regrets over her folly and her sin but she arises and returns. This word "turn" or "return," it occurs actually 12 times in this chapter alone and it's the word, the biblical word for "repentance, to turn back to the God from whom we have turned in our sin and by our sin." To turn back to him. I ask you, congregation, do you know that place of turning? Has news ever reached you from Bethlehem, you there in Moab? And reached you in such a way that something was different and it made you arise and turn homeward? I'm afraid that so many are content in Moab even despite providential calls in their life, the pull of Moab, the comforts of Moab are still so strong for them, and they have not yet come to an end to themselves and an end of their own resources and so they stay there year after year after year even when as so often around this time of the year, Bethlehem calls. There is news about Bethlehem, the house of bread. Are you like one of those who just simply stays in Moab and the call comes every year? The news, "There is bread enough and to spare in Bethlehem"? And yet Moab holds you down. Moab is still so strong. Your heart is welded to Moab. The world has such an attraction for you. The pantries of Moab are still so full with the things that your heart needs and desires and the bread of the father's house, you still haven't needed it, at least not enough for those first steps.

But the Lord is instructing us here, isn't he, about that way of repentance towards Bethlehem because see in your mind's eye with me, three women: all three of them are going towards Bethlehem and yet not all of them will end up in Bethlehem. You know the story don't you, children? Naomi, Ruth and Orpah. There they are going, three widows, all heading toward Bethlehem and yet at a certain point, Naomi tests them, doesn't she? "Return," she says to these young women. "Return back to Moab. Back to your families. Back to your people. Back to your gods. Why would you go along with

me? I'm too old to have an husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have an husband also tonight and should also bear sons; Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands? nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD is gone out against me." The Lord tests us, doesn't he? He tests us this morning and he puts before us all that Moab has to offer you, young people, as well. Think about it, the life of the people of God, like Naomi says here, is not always an easy life. It's often fraught with difficulties. You're often alone. There are hard things that the Lord brings upon his people and Moab, just look at your friends around you. Moab has so much to offer. Are you sure the life with the people of God is what your heart desires? You know, the Lord comes with these tests, doesn't he? He did it through the prophets time and time again. What did Elijah say to Israel which was halting on two opinions? Trying to serve both the world and the Lord. He says to them, "No, no halting on two opinions. If Baal be God, worship him. If the Lord be God, worship him."

Preaching needs to have that separating effect in our hearts and in our lives where we know we can't simply go on pretending to go to Bethlehem and yet in our hearts be wedded to Moab. It can't happen that way. We need to become honest one way or the other. Will it be Moab or will it be Bethlehem? And so Naomi tests Ruth and Orpah here. She says as it were to them, "You're acting as if you're repenting. You're acting as if you're going back to Bethlehem but don't halt on two opinions. Don't think you can serve both the God of Bethlehem and the gods of Moab." And she presses the point with Orpah and Ruth and finally it comes to the point where Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and she returned. Like Pliable, she's gone a few steps on the way to Zion and yet ultimately Pliable's heart was still in the city of destruction and so too Orpah's heart is still with her gods. In fact, Naomi says it, "Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods." Orpah, do you know what you're doing? This kiss of Orpah to her mother-in-law was from all we know, the last contact that Orpah had with the name of Jehovah, with the people of Jehovah, with the God of the covenant. She had been so close really. Maybe she was right on the border of the land when this all happened and there at that point, she waffles and she goes back and that kiss was the last time, the last contact with the people of God. Did she realize that she was close to the kingdom? In a certain sense. It's possible to be close to the kingdom, the Lord Jesus Christ said that to that young man, didn't he? That he was not far from the kingdom of heaven. So close and yet in the end, so far because his heart was far from the Lord. So too Orpah, so close and yet ultimately so far. Almost a Christian and yet completely lost.

Is that true of you this morning? You're here with the professing people of God. You're on the journey, on the way back to Bethlehem and yet your heart is wedded to Moab. Oh, for the Spirit's work to break it in your heart and in your life so that you might be able to say with Ruth, "Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God." What a wonder this is in the life of Ruth. She had the same upbringing as Orpah. She had lived pretty much like Orpah all her life long and yet at this point when Orpah goes back, what a miracle it is that Ruth cleaves to her mother-in-law. There is something within her, something in her heart and soul that is drawing her, that is attracting her to the land of Israel, to the people of God, something that makes a difference in her life where there is

none, it's called distinguishing mercy, distinguishing grace, that makes a difference where there is none. And even though she can't claim much for herself, she has in her heart become what Psalm 119 says, "I am a companion and friend of all those that fear thee."

And so, these two widows are traveling down these dusty roads, up the hills and down into the valleys, even the valley there of the Jordan, that deep, rocky place, across the Jordan, somehow through the water unto the land of promise. One old sinner, one young sinner. Both going arm in arm, you could say, to the land of promise. Oh, how we need that today. In this congregation too, are there old sinners and young sinners arm in arm heading Zion-ward? Their faces turned towards the Lord, asking the way to Zion? But weeping with supplications? Oh, what a blessed sight that is. Like we read in the Scriptures, there is a people whose heart has been emptied of that love for Moab, at least in principle, and who have a desire for the Lord and for the place where the Lord meets with his people, where he feeds them with food convenient for them. Like we sang in Psalm 84, "One day in his courts is better than a thousand spent in Moab." It's better to be a lowly servant with nothing really in Bethlehem than to be everything and to have everything in Moab. Congregation, there is a place with the Lord for people who desire him, for whom in their life and in their heart, there is this yearning. There has come this yearning for God, for his bread, for tokens of his covenant of love. For hearts who have realized their folly and their sin which has taken them nowhere but from the house of bread into Moab with all the danger and really ultimately all the emptiness as well, and whose hearts go out after the Lord for whatever it is that the Lord can give, their hungry and thirsty hearts which Moab can never supply for them.

Oh, there is room with the Lord in Bethlehem as we will see in our third point. "The LORD hath brought me home again." Those are the words of Naomi and it brings before us in our last thought, the mercy behind Bethlehem. How is it that the Lord brings prodigals like Naomi and Ruth and so many others down through the ages and also I trust here in the congregation, how was it that the Lord brought you out of Moab? Well, he does it by visiting them in his mercy. The Lord has visited his people in giving them bread.

Notice four brief thoughts in conclusion. We see here a visiting mercy. A visiting mercy. Notice that it doesn't simply say in verse 6, "Be that the Lord sent bread." He didn't just make bread to come down. It says, "He visited his people for to give them bread." Behind the rain that fell on the fields of Bethlehem, behind the sunshine that warmed the land and behind the sprouts there in the fields, there was the Lord unseen and yet present, visiting his people. How is it that the Lord can visit a wandering and a wayward, a people who does what is right in their own eyes? We don't read any evidence of the people having turned back to the Lord. It's possible and it's even likely that people like Boaz, the remnant among the people of Israel indeed had sought the Lord, but we don't read of that and even that ultimately comes forth from the Lord. It is one sided. Sinners love always when the Lord comes and visits his sinful and his wayward people and here he comes visiting them with bread. Perhaps you do this sort of thing to people who need help, you bring a meal maybe to a young family where a baby has just been born or where there's a sickness and you come with a basket under your arm and you visit them with some food,

with some bread maybe. This is the picture that the Lord condescends to give to his people. He has visited his people and given them bread. He visits them and he fills the basket of Bethlehem, this breadbasket with loaf, upon loaf, upon loaf. He stocks the pantries in Bethlehem once again. He himself comes. He doesn't leave it to another. He visits his people with bread. Child of God, ultimately your heart doesn't just need the bread does it? It needs the Lord. It needs visits from the Lord. It needs fresh visits for your heart and for your soul and, yes with bread, stocking the empty shelves of your heart and of your life with bread but you need the Lord to do that, to come over and visit. Once again, don't you cry for that sometimes, "Lord, visit me once again."

He visits with bread. It's visiting mercy, but secondly, it is drawing mercy because the Lord doesn't just visit with bread but he draws a people to himself to need that bread. He drew with cords of love Naomi and Ruth to this breadbasket in Bethlehem. He drew them with his report that there was bread enough and to spare and so too, he draws lost sinners today who hear that in Bethlehem there is bread, the living bread, the Lord Jesus Christ. Mary and Zacharias would sing of it, wouldn't they? "He hath filled the hungry with good things. He has visited and redeemed his people." The Lord draws a people to himself. He doesn't just visit with bread but he draws people to need that bread and he draws them to have that bread. I don't know if this has ever happened to you but in some sections of our city, I think there are places where they bake bread at night, factories and things like that. I don't know where exactly it is but sometimes when I'm at the seminary at night, I'll smell this fragrant air that passes over the highway. I think it's from the Oak industrial area there somewhere at least, this wonderful smell of bread being baked. What does it do when you smell it? It makes you hungry, doesn't it? It does something inside of you. There is bread and there is this hunger for bread that comes along with it and you could say the same thing happened to Naomi. There she was across mountains and valleys far away in another country but it was as if the report of bread was like this fragrance that came all the way over those mountains there in Moab and she smells it once again and in her heart something awakens and, "I need that bread." Drawing mercy in the life of Naomi and also of Ruth.

But thirdly, there is emptying mercy. Emptying mercy, you say? Yes, emptying mercy. Notice how Naomi says this in verse 21, "I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty." That's always how it goes. The Lord has to empty us and empty our hearts of all those things with which they are so full, wherewith we can make ends meet and make it on our own and the one thing has to go after the other thing. The Lord empties us of our own righteousness, of our own self-confidence, of all our presumptions, of all our own wisdom. He empties us of all these things until there is nothing left except sin and shame and then the goodness of the Lord draws us and there we go home again empty. Oh, what a wonderful work it is when the Lord empties you. The people who make it to Bethlehem are people who have been emptied of everything that they would lean upon for salvation and with their sin and with their shame, they kneel down before that manger of Bethlehem, that breadbasket lowered down from eternity, from the glory with the Father. There, Jesus Christ the bread of life, there a hungry people, comes and there is bread enough and to spare. There is so much in that manger in Bethlehem. There is food for this life and food for the next life.

Oh congregation, are you still so full? Is your heart still so full? When Naomi's heart was full, she went to Moab but when her heart was made empty, she was brought back to Bethlehem. "The proud in vain his favors seek, But thou has mercy for the meek." The Lord empties in order that he might fill.

But finally we see not only visiting mercy, drawing mercy, emptying mercy, but we see finally, Incarnation mercy. The Lord is doing something most miraculous here. He is drawing Naomi this old sinner to himself but he's drawing also Ruth, the Moabitess, to himself. And in that, he is doing something that only God could do and God would do because here he is drawing the great grandmother of David and ultimately that great great great great whatever mother of the Lord Jesus Christ to Bethlehem in order to become the means whereby he in the fullness of time would send forth his Son made of a woman, made unto the law to redeem those under the law. How can it be? Can you figure that out? How the Lord would choose her, a Moabitess, in such a way of man's sin and rebellion and wandering from the house of God into Moab that the Lord would use that and say to his Son from heaven, "She's the one through whose line in the fullness of time you will come and you will be born there in Bethlehem. There you will be the bread of life for sinners like Ruth, like Naomi, prodigals in the faraway country, prodigals still today here in the church. This is the Gospel of Bethlehem." Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

Is it not time to come home, Moabitess, Moabite, Naomi, whoever you are in the faraway country? There is bread enough and to spare for sinners like you. What will Moab do for you? Aren't you yet tired of the husks of Moab? Are you still so full, still so rich, so filled with your own wisdom, with your own righteousness? It will not stand but today Bethlehem is calling and it's saying to you whoever you are, no matter how much you have sinned, no matter how many decades you've been in sin, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound through visiting mercy, through drawing mercy, through emptying mercy and through Incarnation mercy, through Jesus Christ, the bread of life." Amen.

O Almighty, ever blessed and surprising Lord God, how can it be that thou should deal so kindly and so abundantly to sinners like ourselves in giving thy Son to be born of a woman, of one like Ruth in the family of Naomi. O Lord, we pray thee to empty us of our own fullness and that thou would bring sinners home again, that Bethlehem would be a place where many today kneel with the shepherds and with so many others and say, "The proud, thou hast sent empty away but thou has filled the hungry with good things." O Lord, do it. Do it for thy name's sake. Do it for thy glory's sake and pardon all our sins in the Redeemer's name. Amen.