

**Introduction**

Good morning, and welcome to BCF. My name is David Kingston, and by the grace of God I am one of the Elders of this elder-led church, and I also teach organic chemistry at VT. We continue our studies in the Old Testament book of Ruth; a story of grievous loss and despair, followed first by glimmers of hope and ending in the glory of God's gracious provision of blessings and prosperity. The story begins "In the days when the judges ruled", and this was a time of repeated spiritual decline followed by periods of revival, as God graciously heard the pleas of His people for rescue, and God sent judges to rescue them. It was a period when "every man did what was right in his own eyes", sadly not unlike our own times. And during this time of spiritual decline we read the story of Elimelech, a man from Bethlehem, his wife Naomi, and his two sons Mahlon and Kilion, who went to Moab and lived there because of a famine in the land.

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While in Moab Elimelech died, and his two sons Mahlon and Kilion married Moabite girls named Orpah and Ruth.

After 10 years in Moab Mahlon and Kilion both die, and Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth are left as widows without any means of support. Naomi is naturally devastated by these events, but hearing that God had brought an end to the famine in Bethlehem she decides to return home. Orpah and Ruth go with her at first, but Naomi dissuades them and Orpah turns back to her people. Ruth, on the other hand, stays with Naomi and refuses to go back, committing herself to Naomi with the immortal words of Ruth 1:16-17

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"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

So Naomi and Ruth, two lonely widows, continue on their way home to Bethlehem. Let us read what happens next

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Ruth 1:19-2:7

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz.

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And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor."

Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!"

"The LORD bless you!" they called back.

Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?"

The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."

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### Prayer

So what do we learn from this short passage? What is the Lord teaching us through these events? It turns out that there is a lot going on in these few verses, so that we can call this message **"A Light at the End of the Tunnel."**

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### 1. We begin by looking at Naomi's bitterness and grief.

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Naomi and Ruth come home to Bethlehem, and we read "the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." The name Naomi means pleasant, but Mara means bitter, so Naomi is saying that her life has changed from one of pleasantness to one of bitterness. She was deeply hurt by all the losses she had suffered, and it must have seems as if she was walking through a long dark tunnel with no end to it. And she seems to blame God for it; "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." What are we to make of this? Just two thoughts.

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**a. It is OK to take our disappointments and our pain to God.** It is significant that the writer of the book of Ruth does not blame Naomi for her bitterness and grief; it is simply noted as one small episode in the ongoing story. And we have many example of people bring their pain to God, with Ps 35:15-18 being just one example:

They slandered me without ceasing. Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked; they gnashed their teeth at me. O Lord, how long will you look on? Rescue my life from their ravages, my precious life from these lions. I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you.

So the psalmist (David in this case) seems to reproach God for not coming to his aid, much as Naomi did.

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**b. In the middle of our struggles we can still trust God and show the love of God to others.** Have you ever wondered why Ruth chose to leave her own people and follow Naomi into what was, for her, a foreign country? It can only have been that she was attracted both to Naomi and to Naomi's God by Naomi's faith and her life. So although Naomi said "call me Mara" she must have been living a life that attracted Ruth to the Lord.

So how are you doing in this department – And how am I? It is relatively easy to sing

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Blessed Be Your Name  
In the land that is plentiful  
Where Your streams of abundance flow  
Blessed be Your name

But can we also say?

Blessed be Your name  
On the road marked with suffering  
Though there's pain in the offering  
Blessed be Your name

Ultimately it comes down to a choice; do we trust God enough to say

You give and take away  
You give and take away  
My heart will choose to say  
Lord, blessed be Your name

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#### **2. A light at the end of the tunnel.**

Ruth 1:22 – 2:1 So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz.

Here we see the first glimmer of hope; from Moab to Bethlehem “The House of Bread”; from winter in Moab to the spring of the beginning of the barley harvest. And it turns out that there is a relative of Elimelech by the name of Boaz. He is a man of standing, one of the leading men of the town, and he is in the perfect position to help, as we shall see. So God is on the move! There is light at the end of the tunnel!

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#### **3. God’s care for the poor and Ruth’s care for Naomi**

And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter."

In this passage we see two aspects of caring for the poor; God’s design and Ruth’s part in fulfilling this design.

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#### **a. God’s care for the poor.**

The Bible contains more than 300 verses on the poor, social justice, and God's deep concern for both. God speaks through Isaiah, for example, in these words selected from Isa 58:6-9

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6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,....  
7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — ....

8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

And one aspect of this care was the command to landowners to leave some of their crop for the poor.

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Lev 19:9-10

"When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

This was God's way of providing for the poor and the aliens living in Israel. Before we go further, let me ask this question of all of us, myself included: How concerned are we for the poor among us? Do we have God's heart for the poor, or do we rationalize our responsibility away with the feeling that the government is taking care of them or the actual poor are people we really do not have to pay attention to; maybe they are of a different race, or not speak our language, or aren't moral enough for us?

Here is a simple practical test. According to [payscale.com](http://payscale.com) the average wage for waiters and waitresses is \$5/hour, so they depend on tips to make even poverty-level income. And Sundays are the worst days for tips, according to several studies; sadly churchgoers are notoriously bad tippers. There is even a website "Sundays are the Worst" designed to encourage Christians to leave good tips, and on it there is the story of a pastor who wrote on his check "I tithe 10%; why should you get 18%" and left no tip at all. Justin Lee, a writer and a former waiter, wrote "Remember, my fellow Christians: Whatever you do, wherever you go, whenever you tip, you are representing Jesus. And what makes the most difference in that moment isn't your words or your theology; it's your grace, love and generosity." So here is my question: when you go out to dinner at a restaurant on Sunday or any other day, how generously do you tip? Think of your tip as the gleanings you are leaving behind for the benefit of the poor.

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### b. Ruth's care for Naomi

God's instructions to the Israelites to leave the gleanings for the poor implies that the poor needed to work to take advantage of the "free pickings". And here Ruth shows her sterling qualities. In sticking with Naomi and moving to Israel she showed **faith** in God and **loyalty** to Naomi; now she shows her **servanthood**. Naomi does not ask her to go and glean; Ruth says "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain". She realizes that they need food to eat, and she is willing to work hard to provide it.

She also is **humble** in her service. The foreman reports to Boaz: She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.'

Ruth does not presume the right even to glean. All she wants to do is gather up the leftovers after the reapers are done and she asks permission even to do that.

And finally she was **hard-working**; the foreman goes on to say "She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."

Gleaning may sound like fun, but in reality it was hard back-breaking work in the hot sun, picking up the scraps left behind by the reapers, but Ruth was more than willing to do this menial job to put bread on the table.

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So Ruth is held up for us as an example of faith, loyalty, servanthood, humility, and diligence.

We now come to the turning point of the whole book. Up until now there has been only famine, flight, death, poverty, and bitterness, but from this point on the whole story takes on a new and more hopeful note.

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### 4. The Providence of God.

Ruth 2:3 So (Ruth) went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. *As it turned out*, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.

That little phrase “as it turned out” is the key to the whole book. The fact that Ruth worked in Boaz’s field led to his meeting her and ultimately to their marriage and the birth of their son Obed and to his grandson David and in the fullness of time to David’s greater son Jesus Christ. And so was this an accident? Was it by pure chance that Ruth ended up in Boaz’s field? If you were to ask Ruth why she was in that particular field she would have had a logical answer. Perhaps this field was the closest to her home. Perhaps it had more grain than the other fields...who knows why from a human standpoint she was there, but God had everything planned out in advance. His plan was working perfectly. From God’s vantage point she didn’t just happen to go to Boaz’s field.

That’s exactly how the Lord works in our lives.

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Prov 16:9

In his heart a man plans his course,  
but the LORD determines his steps.

So we think through things and make decisions and plan our way. The way we plan is already in the realm of God’s providence. He already has things planned out and they will come to pass.

We know that in God’s plan there is nothing left to chance. Ultimately God is in control, although that does not always mean a happy outcome. The Epistle to the Hebrews recounts the stories of many who suffered for their faith:

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Heb 11:35-38

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37 They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

So why do some Christians seem to enjoy God’s blessings, as Ruth eventually does, while others suffer serious sickness or job loss or the death of close family members? Ultimately we do not know; all we can do is to trust that the God who loved us so much that He sent His son to die a willing death for us to bring us to himself, that this God knows us and loves us and allows trials as well as blessing into our lives to prepare us for eternal life with Him.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the only answer to the ultimate problem of pain and suffering; it is the proof of God's love, just as the resurrection is proof of God's victory. For those of us struggling with pain or loneliness or loss, look to the cross and know that God loves you; ponder the price that was paid for your salvation, and thank God that you are in His hands. And then look at the empty tomb and know that God has defeated the devil and his minions, that God is still on his throne, and that he works in all things for the good of those who love Him.

We will sing these words as part of our closing song in a few minutes; as you sing them think of what they mean to you, and then sing them with trust in the God who would rather die than see you go to hell.

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When trials come no longer fear  
For in our pain our God draws near  
To fire a faith worth more than gold  
And there His faithfulness is told  
And there His faithfulness is told

When I am weary with the cost  
I see the triumph of the cross  
So in its shadow I shall run  
Till He completes the work begun  
Till He completes the work begun

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## **5. The Character of Boaz**

Ruth 2:4-7

4 Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!"  
"The LORD bless you!" they called back.

5 Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?"

6 The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. 7 She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."

We now meet Boaz for the first time. We already know that he is a relative of Naomi's and that he is a man of standing; a man of integrity, who was respected in Bethlehem, and probably a wealthy man. We now learn that he is a godly man. He greets his harvesters with the blessing, "The LORD be with you!", and they respond "The LORD bless you!"

He is also a good businessman; he has employees and a foreman in charge of them, so he could have taken life easy at home, but he takes the time to visit his field and check on the progress of the harvest.

And finally he is a kind man. He notices Ruth gleaning around the edges of his field, and he does not ignore her as someone who is not one of his own workers, but he stops to ask about her. The foreman tells Boaz who she is, but we will have to wait until next week to hear Boaz's response to this information, when Sandy will pick up the story.

Boaz is an example to all of us who have people who work for us, whether we are businessmen or businesswomen who have employees, professors who have graduate students working for us, or supervisors in

an office or factory. We should make it our aim to be men and women of integrity, to do our work diligently, and to care for our employees.

## **Conclusion**

What are the take-home messages from this passage?

1. Even in the middle of our struggles we can still trust God and show the love of God to others.
2. God cares for the poor, and so should we
3. God is in control
4. How do we compare with Ruth in faith, loyalty, servanthood, humility, and diligence?
5. How do we compare with Boaz in integrity, faith, diligence, and care for others?

Let us now join together in testifying to our faith by singing “When trials come no longer fear”

## **Song**

Jude 24-25

24 To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— 25 to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.