

## Ruth Part One: A Journey for the Broken Hearted

### I. Tragedy

“[Naomi is] a stranger in a strange land [who experiences] the desolation of grief.”

– Clara Balfour

We can imagine Naomi using the words of the eighteen century poet Edward Young to describe the series of fatal blows she experienced:

“Insatiate archer! Could not one suffice? Thy shaft flew thrice, and thrice my peace slain.”

- Edward Young

Instead of saying, “There must not be a God,” or “God is absent,” Naomi says, “the Lord’s hand has turned against me,” and “the Almighty has made my life very bitter...the Lord has afflicted me...the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” (vv.20-21).

She draws a straight line from her suffering to God. Is she right? Did God *cause this*? We don’t know. But we do know from other places – in Job, Ecclesiastes, and Jesus’ own teaching – that we can’t really draw these straight lines. In most tragedies, we will not know why it happened, and we may never know this side of eternity.

When we are in the midst of trauma or grief or distress, it can be very hard to talk *to* God.

Now, if Naomi had the Psalms – this story takes place long before they are written – she might have used them as a prayer guide, maybe borrowing the words of Psalm 25: “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve my troubles of heart and free me from my anguish. Look on my affliction and my distress...Guard my life and rescue me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.” – Psalm 25:16-20

### **Take Home: 1. We Make Space for the Grieving and the Hopeless**

When someone is going through a process of deep loss and grief, we need to recognize that, for a time, they will not be able to see more than two inches in front of them. It’s like the world closes in around you, and looking up, or looking out, is very difficult.

### **So we make space for people who cannot ‘see’ for themselves at the moment.**

“Naomi...can’t take seriously the way her daughters-in-law reach out to her. In a sense they are offering her hope, but she can’t recognize it as that. In the aftermath of bereavement, it’s impossible to imagine that there will be any future for you.” – John Goldingay

There may be times in life – especially in bereavement – where we feel utterly hopeless. The feeling is real. But the good news is, there is ‘real hope’, despite what we feel in the moment.

## II. Providence

As we'll see in Naomi's story, God is actively at work, in subtle, beautiful ways, through the ordinary stuff of life. Though Naomi is angry at God – and fair enough – God has never stops working toward her ultimate good – and he'll never stop working for yours. That's essentially what the word "providence" means.

Even in the midst of tragedy, in the middle of the worst, God is not absent – thought it may seem like it. No. He's working. He's always working.

The grace of God's providential care begins a process of transformation in Naomi – from this place of deep sadness, loss, and hopelessness – toward hope again.

### Take Home: 2. God's Providence Invites Our Trust

## III. Loyal love

"Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness [*hesed*], as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. <sup>9</sup> May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." – Ruth 1:8-9

The Hebrew word *hesed* may best be translated as "loyal, committed love."

Ruth commits herself with this "loyal love" to her mother-in-law:

"<sup>16</sup> But Ruth replied, "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. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." – Ruth 1:16-17

Ruth becomes, for us, a model – a picture – of what faithful, committed love looks like.

"The Lord's solution to Naomi's plight will be found in community, as Ruth and Boaz reach out through their acts of *hesed* [loyal love] to bring fullness, security, rest, and a future hope to Naomi." – Marion Anne Taylor

### Take Home: 3. Community as God's Channel of Healing

"Mourn with those who mourn." – Romans 12:15

"Although I'm sure it has never been easy to be present with and to those who are suffering our culture's three cardinal virtues [productivity, efficiency and speed] powerfully disincline us to placing ourselves among those who weep. Few people seem genuinely willing to slow down and offer real presence to those who otherwise weep alone. As a result, so many among us

suffer in deadly silence and isolation, devoid of any real human contact, let alone real presence.” - Phil Kenneson

#### **Take Home 4. The Church needs Naomi's**

If we never had the broken, the grieving, and hopeless among us, we'd never really have to give, and pray, and have faith the way we were meant to. One day you will be Naomi – and we need you to be. I have been Naomi.

If you are the one who is grieving or hurting...open your life to the others. *Do* answer the phone call. *Do* answer the door. Do say “yes” to the casserole.

- Grief Share is a program to help people after the death of a loved one
- Life Groups are intended to be a context for hurting people to be loved and cared for

#### **Aaron and Amanda's Story**

“Thankful is what I am, O living and Eternal King, for you have graciously returned the breath of life (Or Soul) within me, with compassion. Great is your faithfulness.”

– A Jewish Morning Prayer

#### **IV. When Hope Breaks In**

The God whom Naomi blames for her losses is the same God who will personally, very personally, will again ‘visit’ her Little Town of Bethlehem. And again, he will bring “bread” to feed his people – but in a way no one expects.

Through Naomi's own story – as we'll see at the end of this book – the child born to Ruth and Boaz will be the grandpa to king David.

And, as the story of the Bible unfolds, the true King of the world, the Saving One, would come from David's line. He is called be the “Bread of Life” in John's Gospel and is born in a feeding trough.

And – like Naomi – this little boy's mother, Mary, she'll lose her boy. “And a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:35) Mary hears from the shaking old prophet Simeon that day that Jesus was dedicated in the Temple. But his death would defeat death forever. The parting that has crushed Naomi's soul from her husband and boys – it will not be forever. Because Jesus. Because Jesus was raised. Because Jesus now reigns and offers hope forever.

## Life Group Study Guide and Reflection Questions

### Open Up

#### Read Ruth 1:16-18

Ruth becomes an example to us of 'loyal love', a feature of God's own character. Though it happens to be her mother-in-law to whom she pledges this love, the call to offer 'loyal-love' is given to all Christ followers to demonstrate (John 13:34-35; 1 Peter 1:22) and, like Ruth toward Naomi, particularly towards "widows and orphans" (James 1:27).

1. Have you had an experience of someone offering you care in a challenging time that reminds you of Ruth's love for Naomi? What was that like?
2. How is Ruth's commitment an encouragement or challenge to you?

The text highlights the fact that Ruth was a Moabite, an outsider to Israel. Yet, her commitment to Naomi shows that she has shifted her allegiance from the "gods" of Moab so that she can say "your God will be my God." (1:16b). She also refers to the Lord, *Yahweh*, Israel's God, as the one to whom she's accountable. In this sense, we see Ruth as a model of how Gentiles are included into the people of God – a theme that looks back to God's words to Abraham (Gen 12) and anticipate the work of Jesus for all people.