

Returning Empty from the Fields of Moab

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[0 : 00] We're going to read together in the scriptures now, and we're going to read in the Old Testament in the book of Ruth. And we're looking forward to Phil Copeland beginning a little series to take us through this lovely little book that comes early on in the Old Testament after the book of Judges, page 222, I think, if you have one of the red church Bibles here.

And this evening we're going to read the whole of chapter 1, which begins the story. And as you'll see, it's set immediately in the times of the Judges, right after this book that tells us it was a dark period when there was no king in Israel, when everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And in the days when the Judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi. And the names of his two sons were Malon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died and she was left with her two sons. These took two Moabite wives.

[1 : 22] The name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years. And both Malon and Chilion died. So that the woman is left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab. For she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.

So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law. And they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house.

May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of her husband. And she kissed them and they lifted up their voices and wept.

And they said to her, No, we will return with you to your people. But Naomi said, Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husband?

[2 : 32] Turn back, my daughters. Go your way. For I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown?

Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it's exceedingly bitter to me for your sake 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, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law.

But Ruth said, Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go. And where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried. And may the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.

[3 : 34] And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.

And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the woman said, Is this Naomi? She said to them, Do not call me Naomi.

Call me Mara. For the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full. And the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi?

When the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me. So Naomi returned and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab.

And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, please do turn in your Bibles back to the book of Ruth.

[4 : 42] In these dark days that we live in, where can we turn to find hope and life? Well, Ruth chapter 1 has got the answer.

We begin a new series tonight. And before we launch into the chapter itself, let me just say two very brief words of introduction about the book as a whole. Firstly, the book of Ruth assures us that our God is sovereignly at work, even in the bleakest and darkest days, to bring about good for his people.

That is true on the big scale, if you like, as the Lord deals with his people as a corporate body, as a whole. And it's also true on the smaller scale in the individual lives of his people, as they go about their ordinary things.

Second word of introduction is that Ruth links the days of Judges with the days of David. You can see that from the bookends that sit either side at the end of the book.

Please look at one verse 1. The first bookend, in the days of the Judges. And I flick to the very end, please, to chapter 4, verse 22. And just look down at the genealogy there, to the very last name that's mentioned, David.

[5 : 59] David. So Ruth holds a key place in God's unfolding plan of salvation. Because it's an account of the advance of the royal family line of the Bible.

The family line of promise from which David would later come. And therefore, ultimately, the line from which the Lord Jesus himself would come all those centuries later.

Now we could spend the rest of our evening thinking about those two points. But we must get into chapter 1. I want to split the chapter up into three scenes. Scene 1, verse 1 to 5.

A disastrous decision. Scene 2, verse 6 to 18. A tale of two turnings. And scene 3, verse 19 to 22.

A believer is brought back bitter. Well, let's look at scene 1. A disastrous decision. Please look at verse 1. In the days when the Judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.

[7 : 00] So as Willie said earlier, Ruth is a book that's set during this incredibly dark period when the Judges ruled. In Israel. When there was no king. And we're told that everybody did what was right in their own eyes.

And throughout this period, God's covenant people constantly sank down into lawlessness and disobedience and idolatry. And so in response, the Lord, faithful to his covenant, would bring curses upon the people.

And so in response here, it seems that that's what's going on. One of the covenant curses is famine. And that seems to be what's happening here at the beginning of the book of Ruth.

Bethlehem, which literally means the place of bread, had become the place of no bread.

The place of famine. Emptiness. And hunger. And then we're introduced to Elimelech. And in the face of the famine, Elimelech packs up his family and he makes a very, very strange move indeed. See, not only does he take his family out of the promised land, which would have been very strange for any of God's people to make. He then moves to Moab. Seriously.

[8 : 14] Now, there's no explicit criticism of this man. We're not explicitly told that he was wrong to go to Moab. At one level, it's understandable to go somewhere else when there's famine in your own land.

It's perhaps not what we would class as a wicked action in the way that murder or adultery are wicked. Elimelech was guided, as we all would be, by our natural senses.

His senses told him that there was a smell and taste of food in Moab. And so that's where he went. But Moab? Pragmatism is all very well.

But places in the Bible, as places in every sphere of human history, have connotations. And all the resonances of Moab are poisonous. Every single one.

Let me just list some of the Bible texts that talk about Moab. Genesis 19. We're told that Moab had its origin in drunken, incestuous sex. The book of Numbers tells us that it was the Moabites who hired Balaam to curse Israel.

[9 : 18] And that their women lured many Israelite men into sexual immorality and idolatrous worship of Moabite gods. In Deuteronomy 23, there are commands that say that the Moabites were

forbidden to become members of the assembly of God's people, even to the tenth generation.

In Judges 3, more recently in Bible history, we read that the king of Moab tormented God's people for 18 years. And we also know that Moab's god, Chemosh, was worshipped by child sacrifice. And that was an utter abomination to the Lord. And yet this is where Elimelech takes his family.

This is not things were difficult in town A, so we moved to town B.

This is more like things were difficult in our hometown, so we packed up the family and relocated to join Islamic State in Syria. That's what the move is like.

It's a very strange move to make. Notice in verse 2, we get a flurry of their names. Names, names, names. Elimelech, Naomi, Malon, and Chilion.

[10:30] Now why put these here? Well, each name suggests life. Naming is what you do when a baby is born. It suggests potential, hope, significance, a given identity.

And not only do these people have names, they also have a clan. Verse 2, they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. And that is where they belong.

That is home. They have land there, their inheritance in the promised land, which of course, as you'll know, stood for their share in all of the covenant promises of God. But they pack up and they leave all of that behind, as though it was nothing, meaningless, and go to Moab.

And of course, it turns out to be a disastrous decision. Verse 3, Elimelech, husband of Naomi, dies. He's now just a name on a gravestone.

Naomi still has her two sons. Presumably, they will care for her in her old age. Verse 4, they marry two Moabite women. But after 10 years of childless marriage, both of them die as well.

[11:41] Moab, the place that promised fullness, life, and hope, has only delivered emptiness, death, and despair. Notice the very end of verse 5.

Just look at that very end of verse 5. None of them are named anymore. The family that was once full of names and life is now empty, nameless, and void.

Even Naomi, notice, she's referred to as simply the woman. She might as well have no name. For in her current situation, and it's heartbreaking, she's as good as dead.

She's as good as dead. You see, back then, it was vital for women to be under the protection of a man, whether it be a husband, a father, or a son. Today, you might think that's outrageous and protest against it.

Because in our culture, women as well as men have access to education, to professions, to good jobs, to their own pensions, to independent means of subsistence, and much more.

[12:42] A woman without a man in our culture can thrive. But not back then. A woman devoid of the protection and provision of a man was as good as dead.

We might not like that, but that's just how it was. So Naomi is destitute, and her emptiness, it really mirrors the current state of Bethlehem, the barrenness of that land and famine.

She was outside of the promised land, devoid of husband or sons, surrounded by death, and facing a very slow demise. She went to Moab in search of life, but finds it to be the land where names are erased.

Yes, it was very alluring, but just like all the kingdoms of the world, it only delivered death. It was a deceitful seduction. My friends, surely this disastrous decision, it should be a sobering warning to all of us as the people of God today.

When faced with some time of difficulty, where will we turn to find hope and life? Will we turn away from the kingdom and go to Moab, turn away from the Lord, his loving rule and his people, his church, and instead look to the kingdoms of the world for hope and life?

[14:03] Ruth 1 says, whatever happens to you, do not do that. Don't go to Moab, for to be away from the Lord and his kingdom is to be far away from life and hope.

I wonder where you are this evening, spiritually speaking. Are you in the Lord's kingdom, under the rule of his son? Or have you been seduced by the world around you?

Have you gone off to Moab in your heart? I think painfully of someone that was very close to me, a professing Christian, who in order to try and fill the sense of emptiness in her heart, instead of turning to Christ and looking to him for fullness, she's turned to the world.

She's left Christ's people. And the last I heard, she's now moved in with a non-Christian boyfriend.

She's gone off to Moab in her heart, away from the kingdom of God.

And I tell you, ultimately, she will not find what she's looking for. I think of another young lady that I knew well. Again, she's a professing Christian, or she was.

[15:09] But instead of seeking life in God's kingdom, she was seduced by the teaching of the world. And she thinks that the felt emptiness that she has will be filled by going through supposed gender reassignment therapy.

She's currently identifying as a man. She left the kingdom of God in her heart a long time ago to sojourn in Moab. Ultimately, she will not find what she's looking for.

My friends, all of us will feel the temptation to do the same in one way or another. So we must remember what Ruth 1 says to us. The world, it's not as good as it pretends to be.

It may promise much, and it might deliver a temporary filling, but in the end, it will always disappoint. It will always end in despair and in disaster.

Well, what happens next? Let's look at scene two, which runs from verse six to 18. I've called a tale of two turnings. Now, in the Hebrew, there's one verb that dominates all the way through this scene.

[16:18] And it's the verb that's translated in our Bibles as turn or return or go your way or go back. It's used in verse six, verse seven, verse eight, verse 10, verse 11, verse 12, twice in verse 15, verse 16, verse 21, and twice in verse 22.

Twelve times in total. It is the dominant idea of this scene. In other contexts, this word is actually translated as repent. And what it means, what it stands for is a costly change of mind and heart.

And that is what this scene is all about. It's a drama of costly change. Which way to turn? So in verse six, Naomi hears, that back in the promised land, back in Bethlehem, the Lord has visited his people and graciously provided food for them.

In other words, Naomi hears that the Lord has come to his people by grace and brought them from emptiness to fullness. Let me just say that this is the first of only two explicit mentions in this book of the Lord intervening in a direct way.

There's a mention of it here and at the very end of the book in chapter four, verse 13. We'll come to that in a few weeks time. But notice there's another set of bookends. And what happens in between, the story between these two bookends, the Lord's intervening is never explicitly stated, but it's always implied.

[17:49] Yes? God is always sovereignly at work in this book, quietly, in the background. His hand is upon everything. So verse six, the famine is over, desires are satisfied in the land of promise.

And yet notice Naomi hears of this as an outsider. The Lord has provided food for them, says the text, them back in the land, not for her.

She's an outsider. And so Naomi decides to repent or return. And she leaves Moab with her daughters-in-law following her. And in verse seven, they come to this sort of nowhere land that's in between Moab and Bethlehem.

And that's what we're to picture. We're to picture these three widows standing there in this middle land. Behind them is Moab, and in front of them is Bethlehem. And the key question is, where are they going to turn?

Where are they going to go to? It's a vivid cameo of decision. Naomi is returning to Bethlehem, to the Lord and to his kingdom. But what will these two younger widows do?

[18:57] What will they do? Which way will they go? Naomi begins the conversation. Please look at verse eight. Go, return, each of you, to her mother's house.

May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of your husband.

At this point, a lot of the commentaries, they decide to go very, very hard on Naomi, insisting that Orpah, you know, go back to Moab and Ruth go back to Moab.

That was a very, very wicked thing. But the author of the book doesn't go hard on Naomi here.

Actually, Naomi, in the circumstances, she speaks as a thoughtful voice of common sense.

Moab is where Orpah and Ruth belong. They are Moabites. And if they turn to Moab, they would be sure to find another husband almost immediately. And so, they would find rest and refuge.

[19:58] Naomi has actually been very kind and sensible, given the grim circumstances. And what is more, Naomi acknowledges that both Orpah and Ruth have shown kindness. You notice that word there in verse 8?

Kindness. The word is only used four times in the whole of this book. Twice here, and once in chapter 2, once in chapter 3. But it's probably the most important word of the book.

Because it's the Hebrew word, hesed, which means covenant, steadfast, loving kindness. It means love that creates and sustains a covenant relationship.

One commentator says, it is the superabundant loving kindness that goes beyond what is strictly required of it. And in verse 8, we're told that this is how Orpah and Ruth have treated their dead husbands and their mother-in-law.

So in the moral darkness of Moab, these two Moabite women are characterized by covenant loving kindness and faithfulness. And incidentally, it's true of Orpah just as much as it's true of Ruth by God's common grace.

[21 : 04] And so, Naomi prays that the Lord will show them in Moab the kindness that they've shown to their husbands and to her. And this suggests that Naomi believes that the sovereignty of the Lord extends beyond the borders of Israel.

He's able to show kindness to Orpah and Ruth even in Moab. This, by the way, also raises the question which will be very important for the whole of the book of how the kindness of the Lord is related to the kindness of human agents.

To anticipate something that we'll see later in the book, we'll see that the kindness of the covenant God, God's kindness, it's not some kind of a floaty, ghostly thing that hands in an immaterial spiritual realm.

God's kindness is expressed in the flesh and blood kindness shown by human representatives who act on God's behalf. So Naomi pleads with her daughters-in-law, look, please, return to Moab.

Go back. It's this common sense. And I pray that God would show His grace to you back there as she begs them to do this. But look at what they say in verse 10.

[22 : 14] They say, no, we will return with you to your people. And we think, oh, we breathe a sigh of relief. Naomi's not going to be left alone. She's going to have these two women with her.

But then immediately the tension returns in verse 11. Naomi says to them, turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?

Turn back, my daughters. Go your way. For I am too old to have a husband. If I should have a husband this night, I should bear sons. Would you therefore wait till they are grown?

Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters. For it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. Now what's Naomi talking about here?

She's talking about a custom at that time called leveret marriage. Or the brother-in-law marriage.

You can read about it in Deuteronomy 25. Back then, if a married man died without having fathered a son, then one of his brothers was required to marry the widow so that she might then bear a son and that that son, when he grew up, would then take care of the widow until the end of her life.

[23 : 27] And the son who was born would also carry on the family name, the family line of the dead man. And the son would also take on the family inheritance, the piece of the promised land that they owned.

Let me just talk a little bit about that. You see, back then, a family's inheritance, their portion, or lot within the promised land, it held such huge significance. It was so much more than just a piece of farming ground.

It carried with it a share in all of the blessings that the covenant God made with Abraham. To have that piece of land in the promised land meant to share in the blessings.

To be deprived of it would result in the loss of those blessings. We're actually told in the New Testament that this language of inheritance, almost like it shifts up a gear and becomes shorthand for a share in the new creation.

So your patch of ground in the promised land indicated your participation in the blessings of the covenant. It's of the utmost importance. It's that which Elimelech has left behind at the start of the book of Ruth.

[24 : 36] Now with all of that background in mind, Naomi here is lamenting that in her case there is no realistic possibility of any brother-in-law arrangement by which Ruth and Orpah can bear sons to provide for them to continue the family lines of Elimelech, Malon, and Chilean.

She has no other sons and is beyond childbearing age. Even if she were to marry a man that day, she says, even if I were to find a husband, we had intercourse tonight and we conceived and then I had twins and the twins were born and then they grew up, you know, all those years later.

By that time, you two are not going to be of childbearing age yourselves. Your biological clocks are ticking away. The whole thing is impossible on so many levels.

It's exceedingly bitter for Naomi because Orpah and Ruth can leave her, go back to Moab, marry Moabite men, have children and be cared for. And so she encourages them to do this. Go back, go back, go back to Moab. It's very strong. But for Naomi, there lies only destitution ahead.

[25 : 50] So verse 14, the young women weep again. Orpah does the sensible thing and turns to Moab. But what Ruth does is extraordinary.

It is extraordinary. Please look at verse 14. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Now the word clung speaks of covenant loyalty.

It's the opposite of forsake, to forsake or to leave. As we see Ruth, she literally clings onto Naomi in a most moving moment.

We're really seeing the true love story of the book of Ruth. Then verse 15, for the fourth time, for the fourth time, Naomi urges Ruth to return to Moab.

She says, look, your sister-in-law, Orpah, she's gone. She's doing the sensible thing. She's going back to her people. And notice, she's going back to her gods. So Moab is not just a place and a culture.

[26 : 50] It's a religion. Moab. To return to Moab is to go back to worshipping Moab's gods. What's at stake in this decision here has eternal significance.

Naomi's urging of Ruth to return, it's kind and sensible, but it's not the urging of faith. To hear the voice of faith, we really need to listen not to Naomi from Judah, but to Ruth from Moab.

Please look at verse 16. Ruth said, do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go. And where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people should be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die. And there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me.

And more also, if anything but death parts me from you. Ruth turns to the Lord and his kingdom.

She pledges to show covenant loyalty to Naomi, Naomi's people, and Naomi's covenant God to the very end of her life.

[27 : 58] It's extraordinary. This Moabite woman even takes on her own lips the covenant name of God, the Lord, Yahweh.

And she calls down on herself curses for covenant disloyalty should she break her pledge. You see, in her heart, this woman is no longer a Moabite.

She owes no more loyalty to Moab or to the people of Moab or their gods. Now, why does Ruth do this? Why does she do this?

Well, we can't know for sure how much Ruth had heard about the Lord, but by taking upon herself his covenant name and deciding to cling to Naomi and to her people and her God, she makes a decision of faith.

This is what faith looks like. The covenant language gives us a sure clue that that's what's going on in her heart. The only thing she could possibly have to rely on are the words of the covenant promises given to Abraham.

[29 : 01] And I wonder, we're not told this in the text, but I wonder if she's heard that from Naomi. Orpah has visible, tangible, sensible hope and she turns back to Moab.

But all that Ruth has got is the promises of God, God and his word. And she decides to trust them and to act upon them as she goes back to the kingdom.

And Naomi, now seeing Ruth's steadfast determination, she says, no more. She's quiet and they both turn and go to Bethlehem. And what's the big lesson for us today?

Well, I think the big lesson for us today is that this scene that is all about turning in repentance to the Lord and his kingdom, it tells us that to do that it is really costly.

And it requires the same steadfast determination that Ruth shows here. Turning to the Lord and his kingdom, it cannot be done lightly, but it is utterly necessary.

[30 : 04] If you want to be a part of God's people, if you're here tonight and you're not yet a Christian, then please know that you can be part of God's people. It doesn't matter what your history or your background, where you're from.

But turning to the Lord really does mean leaving behind all that Moab stands for in the lives of Orpah and Ruth. By nature, we all belong to Moab in the world with all of its kingdoms and their glory.

If we want to be part of God's kingdom, we must forsake this and cling to the covenant promises of God in Christ. We must live by faith and not by sight.

It might be, in fact, that you're here this evening and as you look at your own life you think, well actually, I feel like I am in that same place that those three widows stood. Just now I am weighing up the decision whether I should go to Moab, give my heart to Moab or give my heart to the Lord and his kingdom.

Are you there? It was one of my friends who were converted. He sat in the middle of a sermon on this very passage and he thought, yes, that's me. Is that you? Which way will you turn if so?

[31 : 14] You can either follow Orpah or go the way of Ruth. But if you go the way of Ruth, you must know that it is costly. But there's no other way and the Lord is our only hope.

And if you are a professing Christian here this evening, someone who turned to the kingdom in the past, well, let me say to you, are you still turning to the kingdom this day? Turning away from the world to the Lord and his kingdom, it's not just a one-off thing.

It's an everyday whole-of-your-life activity. And it's costly but it's utterly necessary. Well, briefly, let's look at scene 3 from verse 19 to 22.

A believer is brought back bitter. In verse 19, the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem and when they arrived, the whole town seems to be stirred because of them.

And the women of the town, they're shocked. They look at each other and they say, can this be Naomi? And look at Naomi's response. Look at verse 20. It says, don't call me Naomi.

[32 : 20] which literally means pleasant. Don't call me pleasant. Call me Mara, which means bitter. Call me bitter for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me for I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty.

Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me that the Almighty brought calamity upon me? We've seen that a name speaks of a given identity, a belonging, a significance.

A decade after Naomi left Bethlehem with Elimelech, Malon and Chilean, she returns without them. The names of her husband and two sons are left behind on gravestones in Moab.

And now her own name, it doesn't fit anymore. Pleasure has been replaced by great bitterness. And what Naomi says at the start of verse 21 that could really serve as a summary for the whole of the chapter.

She says, I went away full but the Lord has brought me back. The Lord has brought me back bitter and empty. Friends, what the Lord has done for Naomi is severe but let's be clear on this.

[33 : 36] It is a mercy. It's severe but it is a mercy. It is always a mercy to be caused to return to the kingdom of God when we stray.

And of course the Lord operates in just the same way today in the lives of his people. And when the Lord causes us to return to him, he often needs to empty us first, to humble us deeply so that we will have no other option but to turn to him.

And that hurts terribly. It feels severe. But if it leads us, if it ends us, if the result is us turning back to the kingdom and coming back to our saviour and king, there is a mercy for he is our only hope.

Let me just say, if you are feeling utterly empty this evening, then it might, and I emphasize it might, it might not be, but it might just be that your felt emptiness that hurts so much is actually a severe mercy of God in your life, bringing you back to him or keeping you utterly dependent upon him.

It may hurt, but in the end it's for our good because he is our only hope. So as the curtain comes down on Ruth chapter 1 with these two women, I wonder if you can picture them walking their way into Bethlehem, the question that we should be asking as readers is this, what or whom will they find there?

[35 : 10] That's the question you're supposed to be asking at the end of chapter 1. What or whom will they find as they turn to the kingdom? Come back next week and we'll look at chapter 2 to find out.

Well, let's bow our heads and close our eyes and take a moment to respond to God's word in your own heart and then I'll pray for us. Almighty God, gracious God, please help us to turn away from Moab and everything that it represents.

Help us to see the reality that although the world promises to give us life and hope, in the end it will only give us death and despair.

Oh, Father, we ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit you would give us the strength that we need to turn to your kingdom every day to cast ourselves upon your wonderful covenant promises.

Oh, Father, empower us so that we will have the same steadfast determination that Ruth had. Help us to cling on to your Son, your people in your words.

[36 : 33] And Father, with fear and trembling, we ask that where we are in danger of wandering from you, you will have mercy on us and do whatever it takes to bring us back to you, even if it feels severe.

We confess that in our weakness we are so prone to wandering, prone to leave you, the God we love. So most merciful God, please take our hearts and seal them.
Seal them for thy courts above. We pray this in Jesus' precious name. Amen.