

*The Book of Ruth***Managing And Measuring God**

by Steve Zeisler

The book of Hebrews in the New Testament contains a number of warnings, among them this one: "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13). Our sinful nature not only assaults us from the front, persuading us to do what we know is wicked, rebellious, and wrong, but frequently when we set out with good motives, our sinful nature deceives us. We are often blinded by sin.

How many times have we, myself foremost, claimed to be acting in love and found ourselves actually controlling the individual we were claiming to love? How many times have we set out to serve the Lord, when what we really wanted was to be noticed by people? How many times have we worked hard to provide for our children, when what we were subtly doing was competing with other parents? How often do we offer to pray for those who are hurting, when in reality our interest is in gossiping about them? Being blind to our motives is something that all of us fall into, but the problem with blindness is that by definition we don't see what we are doing. How do we discover a blind spot in our life? Sometimes when we see a particular problem in another person, God can use that to help us discover that sin in ourselves. That is the concern of this study.

We're following a beautiful romance unfolding between Boaz and Ruth. The first electric moment of their meeting took place in the first half of chapter 2 (see Discovery Paper 4542). Their relationship will pick up speed in a clandestine night-time get-together in chapter 3, which we'll take up in the next message.

BLINDNESS AND LACK OF FAITH

But at the end of chapter 2 there is an interchange between Ruth and Naomi that brings Naomi back into the middle of the story. We want to spend some time in this study reconsidering her. What we'll discover is that Naomi is by far the most sympathetic person in the book, or at least she is to me. I understand her the best, and I am most like her. Yet it's that very identification with Naomi that God uses to say, "But do you see the problems she has, and are they your own?" Can we detect a kind of blindness and a lack of faith in Naomi, and by seeing them in her, can we discover them in ourselves?

Naomi declares blessings, makes pronouncements, gives advice; she insists and plans and anticipates. We have a number of her speeches in this book. But what she says and thinks consistently misses the mark. She frequently makes claims about God's involvement that aren't true. She offers advice that isn't good. And she does it all with the best of intentions.

Probably the best way to read the book is to contrast Naomi and Ruth. This book is written as a tale of how two widows are given essentially the same difficult circumstances in life, and how they react differently. When we see Ruth live by faith and take risks for Yahweh's sake, able to trust in unseen realities, and we see Naomi unable to do so, we find a key to interpreting the book.

I am similar to Naomi. Her speeches are speeches I could make. Take for example the suffering she went through in the opening paragraph of chapter 1: famine, dislocation, widowhood, the death of her children, poverty, an uncertain future. Ten years go by, and the famine doesn't end. When I and most people I know experience suffering, we bear it for awhile. "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials...." (James 1:2). I know that. If I have a trial, I'm going to consider it all joy. But ten years is ridiculous! There are limits. Eventually God has to be called to account for this kind of hard assignment. So we hear Naomi put God on trial and measure his performance. And she says his performance is inadequate. He hasn't done what he promised, he isn't who he said he was. The only conclusion she can draw is

At other times Naomi wants to manage God. She wants God to give her the reins, to provide the wherewithal for her to make her way in life and then leave it up to her to take care of business. When I hear Naomi talk that way, I know that too is just like me. I want to measure God and manage God. Yet this story is written for people like Naomi to see that there is another way to live. God wants us to live by faith rather than with religious fervor that has no faith.

Let me review briefly some of what we've heard Naomi say in chapter 1. Naomi gave advice to her two daughters-in-law after the three of them were widowed. Her advice was a tour de force of rational assessment. She was even willing to be a bit sarcastic about the circumstances. She looked at her own life and said, "My husband is dead. Even if I were to marry tonight and have children, which is impossible, you wouldn't be able to wait for them to grow up." (She didn't live in an age when sixty-three-year-old women could have children.) She listed a string of reasons why these young women should not look to her for help: "I have no cards left to play, I have no more influence. I am poor and without hope. I can't do anything for you. Therefore, you should return to your mother's home in the land of Moab. You should go where you're apt to find optimum opportunity for your future." That advice culminated in 1:15 when she said to Ruth, after Orpah had listened and gone back to Moab, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

Now she couldn't possibly have given worse advice, could she? The story will convince us of that before it's done. If this were a play, the people in the audience ought to be yelling, "Don't listen to her! There will be no monarchy and no Messiah if you listen to her. Don't do it, Ruth!" And yet Naomi was giving good, reasonable advice as far as she could tell.

Then we heard Naomi's conclusions about herself. Twice Naomi made pronouncements about her life and circumstances. Look at 1:13: "No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." That sentence is wrong on two counts. "It is harder for me than for you," she says. That's not true. Ruth and Orpah had been given the same set of hard circumstances Naomi had been given. They were also poor, widowed, and childless. Ruth would also be a foreigner without any standing or prospects for the future. It was Naomi's self-absorption that made her say it was harder for her than for them. The story doesn't tell us that. The story tells us that all of them had been dealt a terrible blow. Secondly, the hand of the Lord had not gone forth against Naomi. God was slow and faith was agonizing, and it would be very difficult to trust him after what she had been through. But in fact, God was doing the best possible thing. Naomi will end up at the end of this story as one of the great matriarchs of faith in Israel's history. God was doing good to her.

Consider 1:21. Naomi made the pronouncement, "I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call Naomi [Pleasant], since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?" Again, she was drawing a reasonable conclusion. It's one I would have drawn in her place. It was based on years of observing life. And yet it was wrong. God had not witnessed against her, God was not afflicting her, and she didn't come back empty. She came back to Bethlehem with a daughter-in-law, and that was the key to everything in this story. She didn't have sons and she didn't have a husband, but she had the one through whom God was going to provide. She just couldn't see it.

And so every time we hear Naomi give it her best shot-she isn't deliberately trying to do it wrong, she is trying to do it right-her analysis, advice, and instincts are brought into question by the story itself. There is someone beside her who is living differently at every stage. Ruth didn't take Naomi's advice, did she? She said, "No, Naomi, I'm not going to leave you. I love you. This is more important than maximizing my opportunities." And, "No, Naomi, your God is worth trusting, whether you will trust him or not." And by implication, "No, Naomi, I'm not going to be bitter. The hand of the Lord hasn't gone forth against us. He'll do what we can't see yet." We see commitment, love, faithfulness, and awareness of God in the life of the younger woman.

Now let's read 2:17-3:1.

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it

was about an ephah of barley. And she took it up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also took it out and gave Naomi what she had left after she was satisfied. Her mother-in-law then said to her, "Where did you glean today and where did you work? May he who took notice of you be blessed." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed of the LORD who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead." Again Naomi said to her, "The man is our relative, he is one of our closest relatives." Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "Furthermore, he said to me, 'You should stay close to my servants until they have finished all my harvest.'" And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his maids, lest others fall upon you in another field." So she stayed close by the maids of Boaz in order to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you?"

Again, we're going to contrast Naomi's speeches and reactions with what Ruth and Boaz said earlier in the day. (This is still the same day. Remember, in the last message we saw that all of the events of chapter 2 take place in a day.) On this day Ruth (and Boaz) represent one kind of person and Naomi is another.

My point here is not to find ways to ridicule Naomi. The point is to observe that God has determined that he is going to help people who struggle to have faith. He is committed to them and loves them. He is used to human efforts to measure and manage him. We want to gain some insight into the kind of people we are, and then we'll talk a bit more about the commitment of God to deal with it.

MEASURING GOD

What shall we make of Naomi's reaction? The text is clear, first of all, that she missed out on the events out in the field. If Ruth had not come back from Moab, Naomi would have had to go glean for herself. Gleaning was the way for poor people to sustain themselves. The only reason Naomi didn't glean is because Ruth was willing to do it for her. But God was acting to redeem in Boaz's field that day. And the only way for Naomi to find out about it is for Ruth to tell her.

So she asks Ruth to tell her the story of the events of the day, and looks at all Ruth has brought home, the large bag of barley and the roasted grain. It's clear that Naomi is especially fascinated by the surprising amount. She wants to know who is responsible for it. And then she issues a blessing on the one, as yet unnamed, who provided all this.

If we look back at the story, we see that Ruth's response to God's provision was different. Verses 8-9: "Then Boaz said to Ruth, 'Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw.'" At this point, all Boaz has done is give her her rights as a gleaner. He provided water for her, and he insisted that she be treated with respect. And at that, with no ephah of barley, no meal yet provided, no knowledge that more blessing would follow, Ruth fell on her face. She was grateful for the kindness that Boaz was showing. She didn't say, "Who are you?" but "Who am I, a foreigner that you should take notice of me?" She had a humble gratitude to both God and the man of God that preceded any sense of further benefit.

Let's skip ahead for a moment to 3:16-17. Ruth returns again after being with Boaz, and once again Naomi is asking for news. "And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, 'How did it go, my daughter?' And she told her all that the man had done for her. And she said, 'These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said, 'Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'" Boaz and Ruth were aware that Naomi had difficulty in seeing anything of God's care for her that couldn't be measured. So Boaz was wise enough to say, "Be sure and go back with something tangible so Naomi's heart can be encouraged." That's

also in view at the end of chapter 2. Naomi declared a blessing on Boaz, but she was blessing the man who was their benefactor. It's not difficult to wish people well who are likely to do something for you.

MANAGING GOD

Naomi is pleased to learn the name of the man who helped Ruth, and she immediately grasps the implications. Somebody in the extended family will need to take responsibility for the widows and buy back Elimelech's property. That's what her reference to Boaz' kindness to the living and the dead is about. The dead are Elimelech and the two sons. By doing good to the widows, the family members will be taking up these men's responsibility to take care of the family property and the poor women.

Again, we see a contrast with what Ruth and Boaz said in the field. When Ruth said, "Why do you care for me?" Boaz didn't say, "Because I'm a relative." He could have said, "Because I'm of the family of Elimelech, and we're responsible for you." He said something more profound: "It's because you love your mother-in-law [who may not be easy to love at this time]. You love the God of Israel, and you have sought refuge under his wings. I'm doing this is not because of a legal obligation to the family, but because I love God, and I love the people who love him." In contrast, although Naomi wishes Boaz well, and is willing to give God credit for what is happening, what she is tracking is a new opening for her to have an influence on the outcome. "If this is a family member, now I have means by which I can begin to make things happen." It's the other side of the coin we saw in chapter 1, where she said, "Have I yet sons in my womb? No, I have no cards to play, I have no influence left, I can't do anything for you."

That's why in 3:1, at the end of two harvests, Naomi, who is fairly sure now that these two love each other, says, "Now, taking matters into my hands, steering this ship as only I am capable of doing-my daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you?" And once again, if this were a play, everyone in the audience would say, "No, Ruth, don't listen!" And sure enough, it will turn out again that Naomi's advice is unwise. We'll see that in the next message.

Every time Naomi begins to take matters into her own hands, draw conclusions about things, and give directions to people, what the reader ought to say is, "Wait a minute-what is God doing?" Consider the offer, "Shall I not seek security for you?" That rings false even before we know what she's going to suggest. Naomi has not once in the course of this story provided security for anyone else, has she? She gave up on God and any hope that God might provide through the people in Bethlehem. She tried to send her daughters-in-law back to Moab. She has been the recipient of Ruth's commitment and love. It was Ruth who went out to glean for her, who has been providing security for her. It was Boaz who generously provided for her. It was God who generously provided. Naomi has been the recipient of everybody else's good will rather than the provider of security. She has resisted good involvement in the lives of other people. And so we suspect that we ought to be a bit wary of Naomi's advice.

Naomi doesn't see herself. She is convinced that what she is doing is for good reasons and to a good end. But most of the time she urges people to trust themselves rather than God.

How much are we like that? How often do we measure God's performance against our standard, and when he fails yell at him, either inwardly or outwardly, "You're not who you ought to be! You don't keep your promises! I don't like my circumstances!" Or we manage him; given any hopeful possibility, we want to take control But there are people like Ruth who don't do either one; they trust God and obey him.

HOW GOD BREAKS THROUGH

The Naomis of the world, people like us, hardened by the deceitfulness of sin need to be helped. . And again, this book is about how God breaks through blind spots, control complexes, anger, hurt feelings, and weak faith.

There are others in Scripture who are similar. Job's story and Naomi's story are very similar, aren't they? Job and Naomi are dealt crushing blows out of the blue, for no good reason that they are aware of. Finally, Job, like Naomi, shakes his fist at God (Job 30:19-21):

"He has cast me into the mire,
And I have become like dust and ashes.
I cry out to Thee for help, but Thou dost not answer me.
I stand up, and Thou dost turn Thy attention against me.
Thou hast become cruel to me;
With the might of Thy hand Thou dost persecute me."

Then at the end of the book, having confronted God with his failure, Job is caught up in a whirlwind and God takes him on a tour of the creation. God shows him the foundation of the seas, the stars in the sky, the ostrich, the crocodile, the hippopotamus. And he says, "Job, who are you in light of all this?"

At the end of the book, the Job who wanted to measure and manage God, who wanted to call God to account for his failures, says (Job 42:5-6),

"I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees Thee.
Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes."

He declares, "I see now that you are more worthy of praise, more due our trust than I have ever seen before." God lets Job see more of God as a way of helping Job understand that he is no instrument for measuring deity.

Then there are the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. Mark 4:37-41: "And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. And He Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they awoke Him and said to Him, 'Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?' And being aroused, He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Hush, be still.' And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. And He said to them, 'Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith?' And they became very much afraid and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?'" The Lord lets us see more of him than we did before. He rebukes our timidity, he allows us to know the inadequacy of our faith, he challenges us with his authority. "Who is the one who would dare to accuse me of failing him, of not meeting his needs, of not managing his world as well as I could?"

Remember the story of how Martha accused the Lord of failure. Mark 10:40, 41-42: "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." Once again, the Lord finds himself in the dock, accused of not being good enough at doing his job. This time the Lord doesn't give her some terrifying experience of the creation. He takes her face in his hands, so to speak, loving her, but saying, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part...." He insists, "Martha, Martha, it's me. Are you saying I don't care? How could you say that? You need to know that there is something better than you have chosen." It's nearness to him, counsel from him, his breaking through her world view that she needs.

At the end of the story Naomi is going to get to hold her baby grandson. And holding that baby, she is going to have a breakthrough of faith. For those of us who are like Naomi, who think we're doing what we ought to do but in our best moments are fooled, who are running things our own way, claiming to know God's will yet charging off in the wrong direction, who are giving bad advice and drawing poor conclusions, who have only the tiniest amount of faith, the question is, What will God do for us? We don't know whether he will put us in a storm and then calm it, allow us to hold a baby, or whisper our name to us. But he is an expert at taking people who don't have much faith, who are used to thinking they know better than he does, who are upset with him for his failures, who want to manage his world, and teaching these people faith. Remember Job's final conclusion: "I thought I knew something once, I imagined myself a man of faith. I had heard of Thee with the hearing of the ear. But now my eye sees Thee. And I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes."

Ruth 2:17-3:1
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