



# A HOME GIVEN: WHERE THERE'S FAITH, THERE'S HOPE

SERIES: EPIC

Catalog No. 20121111  
10th Message  
Book of Ruth  
Scott Grant  
November 11, 2012

If your life were a cup of hope, how full would it be? Half-empty? Half-full? Mostly empty or mostly full?

The book of Ruth features a woman named Naomi. If Naomi's life were a cup of hope, she wouldn't call it half-empty or even mostly empty; she'd call it completely empty. If you could use a little more hope in your life, this story is for you.

If we're working our way through the Scriptures and have just finished the book of Judges, which depicts the near disintegration of the nation of Israel after she entered the promised land, we're probably ready for the next era. The Bible, on the other hand, says not so fast. We turn to the next book and read, perhaps to our chagrin, that it is set "in the days when the judges ruled." Indeed, the narrative begins in a most unpromising manner. Stick with it, though; it pays off in the end.

The book of Ruth is a drama in four acts, which is reflected, conveniently enough, in chapter divisions in our Bibles.

## Act I

There's a famine in the promised land, which we take as a sign of God's judgment against Israel for her idolatry (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28:23). Has the promised land become the cursed land? Because of the famine, Elimelech, a man from Bethlehem in the region of Judah, leaves the promised land for the land of Moab along with his family: his wife Naomi and their two sons. The Israelites had traveled through Moab to reach the promised land, so Elimelech's departure represents a reversal of the nation's conquest of the land under Joshua. In Epic, we're calling this era, which includes the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, *A Home Given*—the home being the promised land. For Elimelech and his family, the home given becomes the home vacated.

Things go from bad to worse in the land of Moab. First, Elimelech dies. Then his two sons, after marrying Moabite women, also die, leaving Naomi and her two childless daughters-in-law to fend for themselves. In her new land, Naomi mirrors the land she left: she's barren and fruitless.

However, Naomi hears that the Lord has provided food for his people back home, so she decides to return to the land of Judah. Although her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, begin the journey with her, she encourages both of them to return to Moab, which apparently holds out better prospects for them, as native women, than the land of Israel. Naomi says that she is too old to get married and bear sons who could grow up to be husbands to provide for Orpah and Ruth. Naomi, in making her plea to the two women, identifies herself with the dead, observes that life is "more bitter" for her than for Orpah and Ruth, and blames the Lord for her plight, observing that his "hand has gone out against" her. Naomi convinces Orpah to return to Moab, but Ruth stays by her side. Still, Naomi pleads with Ruth to join her sister-in-law and return to the gods of Moab. Orpah, she implies, has done the sensible thing.

Ruth will have none of it. She binds herself not only to Naomi but also to Naomi's people and, more importantly, to Naomi's God.

Ruth 1:16-17:

**"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."**

Ruth turns away from everything that has heretofore defined her—her family, her nation, and her gods—abandoning the apparently brighter prospects in her native land in order to cast her lot with the Lord, the God of Israel. In the book of Judges, the Israelites, the people of God, repeatedly turned away from following the Lord. Now, stunningly, this foreigner, despite the urgings of her Israelite mother-in-law, won't turn back from following the Lord.

Upon her return to Bethlehem of Judah, Naomi determines that a name change is in order. Her name means "pleasant," but she thinks Mara, which means "bitter," would be a better fit, because the Almighty has made her life "very bitter." From Naomi's perspective, she left Bethlehem "full" but the Lord has brought her back "empty." She returns in the condition of the land when she

left it. That land, however, has recovered; it has become fruitful again. But Naomi hasn't recovered. She remains barren and fruitless. All she has is a foreign widow who has no standing in Israel. Again, she blames her plight on the Lord, who in her view has afflicted her.

Many people can identify with Naomi. You hope for a great experience at school but it's been anything but great. You hope for a fulfilling career, but it hasn't turned out that way. You hope for some sort of relationship that would meet your needs, but you're still waiting—or you got the relationship you wanted, only to find that it created more needs than it met. You hope for the strength to make your way in life, but your health fails you. You hope your children will turn out well, but they take a wrong turn. You hope for the resources to make a living, but your finances fail you. For many people, like Naomi, it's not just one loss; it's one loss after another after another. Things not only don't get better, they go from bad to worse. You didn't count on all these losses. And if you're a believer in the God of Israel, like Naomi, it's easy to become bitter. Hasn't he made things harder, not easier? It's easy to blame God, or to lose faith in him altogether. You go out full; you come back empty.

As a young man, I left the Bay Area for the far reaches of the state to work as a reporter for a newspaper in Redding. I went out full—full of hope—but a broken relationship sent me into a tailspin. I found it difficult to function. I quit my new job after only six months and returned to the Bay Area a broken man. I went out full, but I came back empty.

Even if we can't identify with Naomi, we can probably sympathize with her and for those who have suffered the way she suffered. Nevertheless, at this point in the story, we might ponder Naomi's perspective. Has the Lord's hand really gone out against her? Has the Almighty really made her life bitter to the point that a name change, from Pleasant to Bitter, is called for? Has she really returned to Bethlehem empty? She feels empty, and she must give attention to how she feels, of course, just like the psalmists, who reach out for God not by denying what they feel but by expressing their authentic feelings. True, all Naomi returns with is a foreign woman, but consider the woman. True, Ruth has no standing in Israel, but she has faith in the God of Israel and she binds herself to Naomi.

## Act II

How will these two widows get by? Ruth proposes that she visit the fields to gather leftover grain, which, according to Israel's law, was supposed to be left by landowners to provide for orphans, widows, and strangers (Leviticus

19:9-10, 23:22). She chances upon a field owned by Boaz, a wealthy man who was related to Elimelech, Naomi's deceased husband. Boaz, speaking to Ruth, grants her special privileges because he has heard her story.

Ruth 2:11-12:

**“I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”**

Boaz's words to Ruth, a foreigner, are high praise indeed, for he echoes words the Lord spoke to Abraham, the patriarch of Israel: “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Could something be happening with Ruth similar to what happened to Abraham, who was blessed by the Lord so that he, and the nation that proceeded from him, could bless the world?

Literally, Boaz tells Ruth, “May your wages be full.” Naomi deemed herself empty, but now Ruth, her daughter-in-law, has the prospect of some kind of fullness. Ruth eats with Boaz and his reapers, and she eats until she's full. Because of Boaz's kindness, Ruth is able to gather an abundance of grain, which she brings to Naomi, who also eats until she's full.

When Naomi discovers that the landowner is related to Elimelech, she is especially heartened. As a so-called “kinsman-redeemer,” Boaz would have certain responsibilities to care for the widow of a relative (Leviticus 25:25-28). Speaking to Ruth about Boaz, Naomi, after blaming the Lord for her problems, invokes his name in a praiseworthy manner: “The LORD bless him! He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” It's unclear whose kindness she's referring to: the Lord's or Boaz's. In any event, it appears as if both the Lord and Boaz are showing kindness to Ruth, Naomi, and Elimelech. Naomi urges Ruth to stay close by Boaz's servants and to continue gathering grain from his field.

When things go from bad to worse, what do you need? You need faith. Where there's faith, there's hope. You need faith, which inspires hope. But it's hard to believe, isn't it? Perhaps when things go from bad to worse, God will send you someone like Ruth, someone who believes, or someone like Boaz, who reminds you that God rewards

those who believe in him (Hebrews 11:6). Or maybe simply reading about Ruth and Boaz gives you hope. Perhaps, then, though you still feel empty, you might hope for some sort of fullness, and maybe, like Naomi, you can even find it in yourself to praise the Lord, however faintly.

### Act III

Naomi has big plans for Ruth and Boaz. She hopes that Boaz will assume the role of a direct brother of Elimelech and marry Ruth. The law of Israel called for a man to marry the wife of his deceased brother and, if possible, produce a child so that the brother's name might continue in Israel (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Naomi advises Ruth to lie down next to Boaz. If Ruth follows Naomi's advice, she'll be symbolically suggesting to Boaz that he fulfill the role of a direct brother and marry her (Ezekiel 16:9-12). Ruth consents and goes to the threshing floor, where Boaz will bed down after beating out grain. Naomi trusts the Lord to work in Boaz, telling Ruth, "He will tell you what to do."

Boaz, quite naturally, is startled to find a woman lying next to him in the middle of the night and asks what's up. Earlier, Boaz praised Ruth for seeking refuge under the wings of the Lord; now Ruth, echoing those words, answers, "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." Boaz, though praising Ruth for not chasing after younger men, turns her down. Yes, he understands himself to be a potential kinsman-redeemer, and yes, he's willing to fulfill the role of a direct brother of Elimelech. However, he knows of a closer relative, and he must give him right of first refusal.

Boaz sends Ruth home with more grain, noting, "Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed." Naomi, the empty one, gets filled again.

Something is stirring in Naomi, and perhaps something is stirring in you as well. You might call it faith. Perhaps you've been blessed by the faith of someone else, and perhaps you've been able to feed off that person's faith to some degree. Perhaps it could be said that you're growing in faith. Maybe, like Naomi, you're ready to take some sort of action.

### Act IV

Boaz seeks out the closer relative and lays everything out for him. Rather, he lays everything out in a strategic order. There's this piece of land that belonged to Elimelech, and now Naomi has to sell it, because two widows can't work the land. In such a case, the nearest kinsman has the responsibility to buy the land and keep it in the family

(Leviticus 25:23-28). The closer relative tells Boaz it's a deal. Boaz says not quite. The land comes with a woman, Ruth, a foreigner who, from the relative's perspective, brings nothing to the party. Hold on a minute, says the relative. If he marries Ruth and they have children, he'll jeopardize his own children's inheritance. He tells Boaz no thanks; you take her. The closer relative acts in his own interest.

The path is now clear for Boaz to acquire the land and marry Ruth in order to ensure the social immortality of Ruth's deceased husband. Boaz, contrary to the closer relative, acts in the interest of another: the deceased husband, not to mention Ruth and Naomi.

The people of Bethlehem who witnessed the transaction tell Boaz, "May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel." Rachel and Leah, the wives of Jacob, built the nation of Israel: the twelve tribes of Israel came from their sons. Now, stunningly, the people of Bethlehem hope that this foreign woman will rebuild the nation through the offspring born to her. First, Boaz hints that Ruth is like Abraham, with whom the nation began; now the people of Bethlehem hope that she will rebuild the nation. Indeed, something seems to be happening to this woman similar to what happened to Abraham.

Boaz marries Ruth, the Lord enables her to conceive, and she gives birth to a son. When Naomi returned to Bethlehem, she told the women, "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty." Now the women take note of what the Lord has done for Naomi since then. She now has a grandson who will provide for her in her old age. True, she lost two sons, but she has Ruth, her daughter-in-law, who is "better to you than seven sons"—seven being the number of completeness.

Naomi takes the child into her arms, lays him in her lap and cares for him, becoming something of a foster mother. Remember, Naomi, when trying to dissuade Ruth from returning to the promised land with her, disdainfully dismissed the possibility that she would bear a son at her advanced age. Now, the women observe, "Naomi has a son."

If Naomi came back empty, she's full now, in a way beyond anything she could have imagined. But wait, there's more.

### Epilogue

With the birth of a son to Ruth, Naomi's redemption,



her journey from emptiness to fullness, is complete. But the story of the book of Ruth is not complete—not by a long shot. What of the story of Israel? True, Naomi was in need of restoration, but Israel as a whole was also in need of restoration during the days when the Judges ruled.

The son who was born to Ruth: what was his name? Obed. Oh, Obed, who became the father of Jesse, who became the father of ... David, the king of Israel. In the time of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, during the days when the judges ruled, “There was no king in Israel. Everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 17:6, 21:25). For the story of Israel to advance so that she could fulfill her story and bless the world, she needed not tribal leaders such as the judges but a king who ruled over all the tribes. In the days of the judges, during one of Israel’s darkest hours, all was not lost, it turns out, because of three unlikely people, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, but also, and mostly, because of the Lord, who drew up three unlikely people into the eternal drama of redemption and gave Israel what she needed, not only for her sake but also for the sake of the world: a king after his own heart.

The book of Ruth concludes with the ancestry of David, spanning ten generations. Boaz and David occupy the key spots: number seven and number ten, respectively, just like Enoch and Noah in the genealogy of Genesis 5.

There the book of Ruth ends. But wait, there’s more—not in the book of Ruth but what comes of the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth ends with a genealogy. The first book of the New Testament begins with a genealogy:

“Abraham was the father of Isaac,  
Isaac the father of Jacob,  
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,  
Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,  
Perez the father of Hezron,  
Hezron the father of Ram,  
Ram the father of Amminadab,  
Amminadab the father of Nahshon,  
Nahshon the father of Salmon,  
Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,  
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,  
Obed the father of Jesse,  
and Jesse the father of King David” (Matthew 1:2-6).

Notice the names in the book of Matthew that also appear in the book of Ruth: Boaz, Ruth, Obed, Jesse ... David. And how does the book of Matthew introduce the genealogy? With the first words of the New Testament: “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Where was he born? Bethlehem, the city of Naomi.

Now we see: Naomi didn’t come back to Bethlehem empty; she came back with Ruth. She came back with a woman of extraordinary faith. And where there’s faith, there’s hope. Indeed, in the words of Steve Zeisler, when Naomi came back with Ruth, she came back “with the future of the human race,” for David and, more importantly, the Son of David came from Ruth. The woman who called herself empty plays a key role in the epic drama of redemption.

## You have a son

How full is your cup of hope? Consider this:

The women of Bethlehem observed, “Naomi has a son.” Naomi had a son who became the grandfather of David, the king. Where there’s faith, there’s hope. If you have faith, you too have a son: the Son of David. If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have the Son of God, and he is your kinsman-redeemer: he rescues you from eternal peril and provides for you not only in your old age but into all the ages. You have hope. If you have Christ, you’re not empty; Christ dwells in you by the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit gives you a foretaste of the coming new creation (Romans 8:10, 8:23; Colossians 1:27). If you have faith in the Son, there’s reason to hope, for God rewards those who believe in him.

Of all the elegant words that have poured from the pen of Frederick Buechner, one of our greatest writers, these are his personal favorites, the words he wants on his tombstone:

*What’s lost is nothing to what’s found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.*

I think Naomi would agree.

When I returned from Redding to the Bay Area a broken man, I thought I came back empty. However, in the far reaches of the state, I had begun crying out to the Lord, and something was happening in me. I was discovering something, or rediscovering something, or discovering something in a new way. Yes, I was discovering the Lord in a new way. Yes, I felt as if I had come back empty, and, like Naomi, I lamented, but in reality I came back with more faith: more trust in the Lord, less trust in myself. True, I was depressed, but where there’s faith, there’s hope. In all, it took me about a year to recover from my excursion to the North State, but when I did, I was in better shape spiritually than when I went out full—full of myself. I came back with the Son. Here’s the epilogue: now, some thirty years later, I find myself drawn up into the eternal drama of redemption. Here’s the epilogue to the epilogue:

I was being drawn up into it back then; I just didn't know it. What's lost is nothing to what's found.

Last summer, I officiated at a memorial service for a woman whose life mirrored that of Naomi. Like Naomi, Janet Dowd lost her husband and her two sons. She lost her husband and one son in a tragic accident, and a few years later she lost her other son. All three of her men were gone, and she still had many years to go. A few months ago, when her family and friends gathered to mourn her loss and celebrate her life, I said that Janet's story was not a story of loss. She had a deep love for the Scriptures, which helped lead her to a profound faith. She lost much, but she gained Christ. Many years ago, she started the bereavement ministry at our church, and when time came that she moved on, the ministry that she started was here for the loved ones she left behind.

## **Drawn up into the drama**

If you have the Son, your story is connected to the eternal story, which means that your story is heading in a good direction. Furthermore, you, like Naomi, have a part to play in the drama, even if you feel empty. During one of Israel's darkest hours, Naomi, who deemed herself empty, returned to Israel with the future of the human race. No matter how dark the hour, we carry the future of the human race with us, for we are the dwelling place of the Son of God. God draws us up into the eternal drama of redemption and through us, somehow, gives the world what it needs: the king. And we carry him with us into the ages.

“All the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.” As for your cup of hope, on the other hand, rest assured, that in the fullness of time, it will be full to the brim and overflowing.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, “Religion and Ethics Newsweekly” (May 5, 2006), Episode 936.