



Those of you who've hung around a three-year-old lately know how they love to ask a one-word question over and over again: "Why?" You're out walking and you say to him, "Isn't this a beautiful day," and he asks, "Why?" You're out to dinner and you tell him not to burp at the table and he asks, "Why?" You tell him, "Look at mommy. Doesn't she look beautiful," and he says, "Why?"

It can be exhausting trying to answer all those "Why?" questions. We don't always have good answers, and even if we do they often can't understand it. And even if they can understand the answer, it often doesn't matter. They'll ask it again, "Why?" It's like they've fallen in love with the question, "Why?"

As I hang around adults I've found we're just overgrown children. We also like to ask, "Why?" It usually comes from a far deeper place than when our kids ask it. Why me? Why this? Why now? And the Lord doesn't always give us a clear answer to our questions. Even if he does, we often get stuck on the "Why" question and eventually spiral down into bitterness, cynicism and even despair.

I'm learning a much better question to ask is "Who?" If I understand the "Who?" then the "Why?" question won't be quite as compelling. Today we're looking at a story in which the main characters, two women named Ruth and Naomi, learn this lesson. Turn in your Bibles to the book of Ruth.

Ruth and Naomi Experience Tragedy and Loss

The story begins with these words, *"In the days when the Judges ruled..."* This was a dark time in Israel's history. The spiritual life of Israel was in a free fall. To make matters worse, it says, *"...there was a famine in the land."* Times were hard times, but God had warned his people if they turned their back on him this is what to expect.

Then we're introduced to the family of a man named Elimelek. He migrates from Bethlehem (house of bread) in Judah to Moab. He takes his wife, Naomi, and their two sons 40 miles to an area east of the Dead Sea. In a time of famine, I get why he'd move his family, but this was a faithless act on his part. He's exposing his family to a nation historically at war with God's people and an idolatrous religion.

And he went from the frying pan into the fire, because soon after, tragedy struck. First, Elimelek died, leaving Naomi a single mother in a foreign land. She'd have no way of providing for herself until her sons grew up and could take care of her. We

don't know how much time passed, but eventually her two sons took Moabite wives: Ruth and Orpah. They settled there for 10 years. But, as if one tragedy wasn't enough, Naomi's two sons died. Imagine the devastation; her entire family is gone. Besides the emotional toll of this, there was a practical side as well. Naomi was helpless. There's no SSI to fall back on. She's probably too old to marry. There's no grandchildren. She's overwhelmed by grief, loneliness and deprivation.

For some of us, it may be hard to identify with Naomi. We've had a few problems, but nothing like this. For others, you know exactly what she felt like. You've lost a spouse, parent, friend or sibling. You've been left all alone. It doesn't have to be a death; it can be something like divorce, or an illness, even the loss of a job. We all have to deal with loss on some level. Sometimes it seems to all come at once, as with Naomi. We get hit with one thing and just when we think we may survive another wave crashes down on us. It's almost inevitable at some level we ask, "Why?"

In the rest of Chapter 1 we see how Naomi responds to her hardship. In 1:6 she decides to return home because *"Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them."* The choice to return was important. It shows her will to live. Sometimes in the midst of asking "Why?" the hardest thing is to do is take a step in the direction of life. We can be paralyzed by our need to hang on to the last remnants of the past. We lack the energy and will to do anything at all. We want to just give up; to count our losses and wallow in self-pity, but Naomi makes a decision to live. For us that might be a decision to get help, come to church, look for a job, or just to get out of bed.

In verses 7–18 Ruth and Orpah also make choices. As Naomi heads back to Israel, they go with her. Naomi wants them to stay in Moab because life would be better for them there. They could still find a husband. She even prays for them: *"May the Lord show you kindness..."* That word "kindness" is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*, referring to God's loyal love for his people. It's a word we'll see a lot in this story. That's what she wants them to experience.

Finally, after a lot of tears it says, *"Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her"* (1:14). Orpah returns to Moab, but Ruth clings to Naomi like a two-year-old who won't leave her mother's arms. Here's our first clue there's something special about Ruth. Ruth's words to Naomi are some of the most

beautiful words in the Bible: *“Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay”* (1:16). Often they're used as wedding vows, but Ruth is just expressing her undying loyalty to her mother-in-law. She's making a permanent break with her past. She even says, *“your God will be my God.”* After all that's happened to Naomi, she might have thought, “If that's how your God treats his friends, I think I'll pass.” But she'd come to believe and her faith is expressed in leaving everything behind and showing unusual loyalty to her mother-in-law.

So off they go. Ruth and Naomi make the long journey across the mountains to Bethlehem. We read of their arrival in 1:19–21.

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.”

Upon seeing Naomi, the women of the town whisper in disbelief, “Is this Naomi?” We can only guess what story her face told. Naomi responds with a bitter complaint. Naomi means “pleasant” but Mara means “bitter.” She says, “That fits me better.” Then she again attributes all her suffering to the hand of God: *“the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me...I went out full but the Lord has brought me back empty.”*

Make no mistake, she's lodging a complaint. Her words drip with hurt and bitterness. Earlier she had said to her two daughters-in-law, *“It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!”* (1:13). We're not too comfortable with this. What would you say if someone in your small group piped up and said, “God has dealt bitterly with me.” We might feel Naomi was out of line to talk this way, but you have to appreciate her honesty. Often we think God is offended by our complaints, but when you've trusted someone, it's normal to express your most personal feelings. Part of the reason she complained to God was she believed he was in charge of all of life. She believed in God's sovereignty, but what she couldn't believe in was God's goodness. If God is both sovereign and good, why would he allow this?

She says, *“I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.”* Notice how bitterness poisons everything. It even makes us rewrite history. Had she really gone out full? I thought there was a famine? Had she really come back empty? Look at v. 22.

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

She wasn't empty. She'd come back with Ruth, whose loyalty would be a greater blessing than Naomi could ever imagine, and

it was the beginning of the barley harvest. You know, pain is inevitable in life, but misery and bitterness is optional. When we focus solely on the “Why?” rather than on the “Who?” bitterness follows, and bitterness poisons everything.

God Provides Food for Naomi and Ruth

As we come to Chapter 2, Ruth and Naomi are dirt poor. The question is, How will these two widows survive? Who'll provide for them? In 2:1 the writer lets us in on a secret Ruth and Naomi don't know. *“Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz.”* He doesn't tell us how this fits, but we sense Boaz will come into play. Not only is he wealthy, he's respected. You get the idea he can help these two women. And he's of the clan of Elimelek, Naomi's deceased husband. People in the same clan had responsibilities to one another. We're led to wonder how this powerful relative will fit into God's plans for Ruth and Naomi.

I can imagine the two women sitting at the breakfast table with their head in their hands and nothing to eat. Suddenly Ruth has an idea and says to Naomi: *“Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain...”* In God's law, the poor were allowed to “glean” from the edges of the fields. Somehow Ruth knew that. Naomi says, *“Go ahead, my daughter”* (2:2). So Ruth heads out and enters a field and it says, *“As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz”* (2:3). Another version says she “happened” upon the field of Boaz. This is exciting! We know something about Boaz that Ruth doesn't! He's a relative. He's a man of worth. Look how he greets his workers: *“The Lord be with you!”* And they say to him, *“The Lord bless you!”* (2:4). He's not just a man's man, he's a man of God. People get in line to work for him. Hmmm. I wonder if he's married?

Ruth doesn't know any of this. She didn't plan to go to Boaz's field. She just happened upon it as she was trying to eek out a living. We know, of course, that what Ruth didn't plan, God did. God is at work here. His own quiet providence is working through the initiative of Ruth. God is directing her steps without her even knowing it. He does that for us as well. He takes ordinary events and small choices and uses them to accomplish purposes far greater than we can imagine.

When Boaz shows up, our hearts are really beating. Will he notice Ruth? Sure enough, Boaz sees her and wonders, “Who is she?” Was this love at first sight? I doubt it, but if Hollywood got a hold of this story, they'd go to town! Kate Winslet would play Ruth. Brad Pitt would be Boaz. He'd ride up on a Palomino horse. She'd have just the right amount of sweat and dirt on her face. When they met, she'd drop her eyes shyly; he'd shift nervously from one foot to another. That's Hollywood, but the real story is better. Boaz asks, “Who does she belong to?” The foreman says she's the Moabite widow who returned with Naomi.

Hmmm. How will Boaz respond? Will he take his responsibility to the clan seriously? In 2:8–9 we begin to see Boaz is indeed a man of great worth. He gives Ruth permission to glean, telling her to stay in his field and not to wander to another field where she might get hassled. Gleaners were often treated with contempt, especially foreigners. He tells her to “stay here” and glean in his own fields where she’ll be safe.

Ruth is overwhelmed by his generosity. She bows down and asks, *“Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?”* Boaz replied, *“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”* (2:10–13). What a kind word and beautiful way to describe what Ruth had done. This is what it means to trust in God. Running to God for protection; seeking refuge under his wings. Boaz prays God will bless and reward her for that.

God uses Boaz to provide more than she ever could have imagined. He invites Ruth to lunch. She ate to her full with some left over. He tells his servants not to hassle her as she gleans and even to cheat a little by pulling grain from the bundles and leaving it for her to pick up. She walks off with 25 pounds of barley. She gets home and tells Naomi all about it, and she learns from her that Boaz is a relative. She says, *“He is one of our guardian-redeemers”* (2:20). This was an important role in the Old Testament. He had certain rights and responsibilities pertaining to Naomi’s family. The kinsman-redeemer would marry the widow of his relative and redeem the land that had belonged to her husband. That land would be passed on to any sons from that union so it stayed in the same family. The wheels are turning in Naomi’s head: “This has potential!”

God Provides a Spouse for Ruth

As we come to Chapter 3, we wonder, will God provide a spouse for Ruth? She has no husband and no children to inherit her late husband’s property. In that culture, that’s a tragedy.

In 3:1–5 Naomi comes up with a plan to get Ruth and Boaz together. She tells Ruth to get herself looking good—to take a bath, put some perfume on and her best dress. There’s nothing wrong with looking good. She says to go to the threshing floor where Boaz and the whole town is winnowing barley and wait until he’s finished eating and drinking. Boaz would be in just the right frame of mind to make a move. And then Naomi’s plan gets kind of steamy. Boaz will sleep out there to guard his barley, so wait till he’s asleep and to sneak up on him and uncover his feet and lie down with him. Boaz would wake up with chilled feet and find Ruth. Naomi says when he finds you, let him take it from there. Gee, what does that mean? But it’s not what you think. Naomi bets on Boaz’s character.

That night, Ruth followed Naomi’s script to a tee. She sneaks across the threshing floor. Her heart is pounding out of her chest. Boaz lays down and falls asleep. She tiptoes up, lays down beside him and gently uncovers his feet. Then Boaz wakes up, bends forward and groggily feels around at his feet to cover them up again. Then it says, *“and there was a woman was lying at his feet!”* What a shock! He asks: *“Who are you?”*

Naomi said just lay there and wait till Boaz tells her what to do, but Ruth does more than that. She says, *“I am your servant Ruth... Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family”* (3:9). This is a bold step. She’s asking Boaz to fulfill his responsibility as kinsman and marry her! She’s putting it all on the line. What if Boaz misunderstood her intentions? Boaz must make a decision. We’re holding our breath. How will he respond?

Boaz says, *“The Lord bless you, my daughter... This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor”* (3:10). When he speaks of her kindness he uses that word *hesed* we saw in chapter one. This was an act of kindness because it was done out of loyalty to Naomi and desire for her to have progeny. Not only that, she could have married a younger man. She could have looked for a young stud, but she chose Boaz out of loyalty to Naomi.

Then in 3:11 he says, *“And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character.”* Why say that? Is he just saying, “I’ll marry you because you are a good catch”? Well, that’s part of it. She was a good catch. She was a woman of noble character. He knew that because he’d watched her in his fields for months. This wasn’t love at first sight. This was love born out of months of watching each other in the muck and mire of real life. He knows she’s a woman of worth.

Throughout this passage everyone is acting with kindness (*hesed*). Naomi’s concerned that Ruth find security. Ruth’s concerned that Naomi find someone to carry on her husband’s name. Boaz is willing to fulfill his responsibility to the clan and champion Ruth’s dignity and worth. Everybody is looking out for someone else. Unfortunately, when we talk about love and romance we seldom hear about kindness and loyalty. The focus is on what I want and what feels good for me. We think of duty and romance as strange bedfellows. But, these people in our story have bigger concerns than their own feelings and desires. They’re concerned about loyalty and kindness. Don’t get me wrong, there’s lots of romance here, but romance without *hesed* is just infatuation. You build a marriage not on the foundation of romance, but on the foundation of *hesed*.

But there’s an obstacle. Boaz says, *“Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I”* (3:12). In every good love story there’s an obstacle. The closer relative had the first right of refusal. So Boaz

says first thing in the morning he'll give that man a chance to redeem Ruth. The chapter ends with Ruth and Boaz parting ways and we're left holding our breath again.

God Provides Progeny for Naomi

In Chapter 4 Boaz takes care of business. As he does there are several surprises. The first surprise is when the whole deal is laid out for the other guy and he realizes not only does he get some land but he gets a Moabite woman with it, he says, "No thanks." He had a shot at the best woman in town and he turns her down! This clears the way for Ruth and Boaz to get married, which Boaz commits to do. We read of the marriage in v. 13a. ***"So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife."***

Here the narrator in very simple terms tells us they were married, but this didn't solve the issue of progeny. There still wasn't a child to continue the line of Elimelek and bring Naomi to a place of fulness. Looming in the background is the fact that Ruth was childless in their first marriage. Would God provide a child for Ruth and Naomi? Look at verses 13b–17a.

When he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!"

God's second surprise was a child was born to Ruth and given to Naomi for her to raise as her own. It says, ***"The Lord enabled her to conceive..."*** This was God's doing; it always is. God allowed what had previously seemed impossible to take place. And then the women of the town come to Naomi and bless the Lord for his gift to her. They pray the baby boy would become famous in Israel. They call him a redeemer and a restorer of life to Naomi; all because her daughter-in-law Ruth loved her. Ruth, the Moabite, is better to her than seven sons. Then after Naomi took the child the women proclaim, ***"Naomi has a son!"*** (4:17).

As Naomi clutches the child to her breast we see one of the most tender scenes in the Bible. Naomi, who'd lost so much and cried so bitterly to God, has now been made full. Now the issue isn't "Why?" but "Who?" God has brought her from empty to full. He

can do that for you. No matter how bad it's gotten for you, God can turn it around. Maybe you've lost a loved one, or you've been through a divorce, or you've lost your career or your home or your health, and you wonder if God could ever give you a reason for living again. Naomi shows us he can. Your losses aren't final. God can bring you from empty to full.

Meanwhile, you have to make choices. Will you live in bitterness? Pain is inevitable in life, but misery and bitterness are optional. Will you choose life? Will you choose to live with *hesed*? Will kindness and loyal love guide your life? Will you focus on the "Why?" or on the "Who?" God won't always give us explanations for our tragedies, but he will give us a renewed sense of his presence and a purpose. Naomi had a job to do now, she had to raise this boy! To do that she had to surrender her bitterness, accept God's present gifts, and get on with the job at hand.

The story could have just ended here. What more could we want? But God's plans are usually better than we could ever dream of. He doesn't just meet our needs, he gives us more. In 4:17b we see another surprise. ***"And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David."***

This surprise is startling: the child born to Ruth turned out to be the grandfather of King David! God answered the prayer of the neighbor women: ***"His name became famous throughout Israel."*** We can even take that one step further. His name became integral in the salvation of the whole world! He wasn't only the grandfather of King David but he was also in the direct line of the Son of David, Jesus Christ. What a mind blower! Jesus, God's Son and Savior of the world, would have a Moabite woman in his family tree. Jesus is the ultimate kinsman-redeemer who acted with the greatest *hesed* the world's ever known. Boaz redeemed the line of Elimelek; Jesus redeemed us by paying the ultimate price.

What a story! It can be your story and my story. In the darkest time, focus on "Who?" rather than "Why?" God's hand may be invisible, but it's not inactive. For the child of God, he wastes nothing but redeems everything. He's both sovereign and good. He's a God of loyal love who sovereignly works through his people who act in loyal love, bringing them from empty to full.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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