

Hanging by a Thread

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INTRODUCTION

Naomi, the mother-in-law of Ruth, is our present focus. As her experiences well illustrate, hope often seems to hang by a mere thread. Yet, despite misfortune and tragedy, heartache and grief, the story of Ruth and Naomi ends in happiness.

COMPOUNDED CALAMITY

During the time of the Judges, famine struck the city of Bethlehem in the land of Judah.

Elimelech, a citizen of that place, took his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, journeyed eastward across the Jordan, and sojourned in the land of Moab.

Yet, troubles only increased. Elimelech died, and Naomi was left a widow. Eventually, her sons, who had married two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, also died. Naomi was bereft of her husband and her children.

Deciding to return to Judah, Naomi expresses gratefulness to her daughters-in-law, and prays that the Lord will grant them rest (Ruth 1:6-9).

Ruth 1:6-9 (NASB95) — 6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the Lord had visited His people in giving them food. 7 So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. 8 And 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. 9 "May the Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

Orpah and Ruth manifest a willingness to accompany Naomi, but she insists that they remain behind, urging them to remarry, saying, "No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me" (Ruth 1:10-13).

Ruth 1:10-13 (NASB95) — 10 And they said to her, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? 12 "Return, my

daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, 13 would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me.”

Orpah consents, but Ruth determines to accompany her mother-in-law, and pledges her allegiance to Naomi (Ruth 1:14-18).

Ruth 1:14-18 (NASB95) — 14 And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” 16 But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back 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. 17 “Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.” 18 When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

EMBITTERED COMPLAINT

Returning to the land of Judah and the city of Bethlehem, Naomi asks that she no longer be called Naomi, meaning “my joy” or “my delight,” but rather Mara, signifying one who is “bitter” (Ruth 1:19-21).

Ruth 1:19-21 (NASB95) — 19 So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” 20 She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 “I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

SHREWD COUNSEL

Arriving home at the beginning of the barley harvest (Ruth 1:22), Ruth asks permission to glean grain in the fields. Naomi, says, “Go, my daughter” (Ruth 2:1-2).

Ruth 1:22 (NASB95) — 22 So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Ruth 2:1-2 (NASB95) — 1 Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. 2 And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, “Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.”

Ruth labors diligently in the fields, making a good impression upon a landowner whose name is Boaz; afterwards, Naomi advises Ruth to go out with the maidens of Boaz, and labor only in his fields (Ruth 2:17-23).

Ruth 2:17-23 (NASB95) — 17 So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. 18 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. 19 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.” 20 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.” 21 Then Ruth the Moabitess said, “Furthermore, he said to me, ‘You should stay close to my servants until they have finished all my harvest.’” 22 Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his maids, so that others do not fall upon you in another field.” 23 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.

When it becomes obvious to both women that Boaz has taken more than a passing interest in Ruth, Naomi instructs her to communicate privately with him (Ruth 3:1-5).

Ruth 3:1-5 (NASB95) — 1 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? 2 “Now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. 3 “Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 “It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do.” 5 She said to her, “All that you say I will do.”

Afterwards, Naomi’s advice was “watch and wait” (Ruth 3:18).

Ruth 3:18 (NASB95) — 18 Then she said, “Wait, my daughter, until you know how the matter turns out; for the man will not rest until he has settled it today.”

RESTORED JOY

Through skillful negotiation with the nearest relative before the elders of the city, Boaz gains the right to the lands of Elimelech and the hand of Ruth (Ruth 4:13).

Ruth 4:13 (NASB95) — 13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.

As romance blossoms into marriage, the women of Bethlehem celebrate Naomi's renewed good fortune, and praise Ruth for her steadfast loyalty (Ruth 4:14-15).

Ruth 4:14-15 (NASB95) — 14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. 15 "May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."

RENEWED HOPE

Holding her grandson in her lap, Naomi once again comes to know joy and delight (Ruth 4:16-17). As the hand of God providentially converts tragedy into triumph, hope prevails.

Ruth 4:16-17 (NASB95) — 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. 17 The neighbor women gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi!" So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the value of Christian hope, may we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm to the end (Heb. 3:5-6), having our hope securely anchored to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (Heb. 6:19-20), encouraging one another to hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, remaining ever faithful as the final day of reckoning draws near (Heb. 10:23-25).

Hebrews 3:5-6 (NASB95) — 5 Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; 6 but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.

Hebrews 6:19-20 (NASB95) — 19 This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, 20 where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 10:23-25 (NASB95) — 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.