

## Pastor's Note

Hello

The Christmas season includes this theme that Jesus came to bring hope. Kids are a great reflection of Christmas hope. On Christmas morning they rush to the tree to see if they got what they wanted. Their eyes are filled with eager anticipation. They tear open box and it's... "Socks and underwear? But I wanted a toy." Sound familiar? Has it ever happened to you? Look at Romans 15:13 (NCV) *"I pray that the God who gives hope will fill you with much joy and peace while you trust in him. Then your hope will overflow by the power of the Holy Spirit."* Then your hope will overflow by the power of the Holy Spirit. My guess is if you were honest about it you may not be overflowing with hope right now. And you may not even be looking forward to Christmas. In fact you may be looking forward to Christmas being over because you don't anticipate it will turn out like you hope it will. You want a toy, but you don't expect you'll get what you want.

Maybe there are some life situations that haven't turned out the way you wanted them to this year. It's not what you wanted. You wanted a toy. Maybe life has not turned out the way you'd hoped it would. Maybe you'll have an empty chair at your Christmas table this year. Someone you loved is no longer with you and you're going to miss their laugh and you're going to miss their presence and you're going to miss their love. Maybe you thought life was going to be happily ever after. But now that you've unwrapped it, it's not what you thought it was going to be. And there's disappointment. Maybe Christmas is a tense time because it means dealing with relatives and unresolved issues. Maybe it means dealing with in-laws and exes and child custody issues or a new spouse who's raising your kids. You wanted a toy. You wanted a toy! But it didn't turn out that way.

Let's begin the Christmas season by looking at the little Old Testament book of Ruth. It's just four chapters long. As the book of Ruth begins it's an era when the judges were ruling Israel. This is before the time of kings. There was a famine in the land. We don't know if this famine is the result of the judgment of God or it was just a famine. "There was a man named Elimelech..." who decided to move his family away from the Promised Land, away from the land of Canaan during this time of famine, to the land of Moab, a foreign land. Elimelech's name meant "My God is king." But he didn't live up to his name. Instead of trusting the one living God to supply their food he trusts the foreign land of Moab and their food

supply. His wife's name is Naomi. Naomi means "pleasant" and "sweet." They have two sons. They had bizarre names. Their names were Mahlon and Chilion which literally means "sick" and "dying." If you have a couple of boys please don't name them that. ("I'd like you to meet my boys Bird Flu and Walking Pneumonia.")

As the story unfolds these two boys grow up and they fall in love with two Moabite women, this is in a foreign land, in a pagan culture, who are not believers in God. By the time we get to the end of the second paragraph of Ruth 1, tragedy strikes. Naomi's husband Elimelech dies. We don't know how he dies. We don't know if it was old age, heart attack, got hit by a camel. We don't know. Then unbelievably a short time later both of her sons die. Adult age sons. Sick and Dying die. Big shock there! So now you've got three widows. You've got Naomi, her two daughters in law, all sharing the tissue box, all grieving the loss of their husbands. Can you imagine the grief of losing your husband and both of your adult age sons about the same time? All three of these women were battling with loneliness. Maybe you are battling loneliness this holiday season.

So Naomi decides after her husband's death that the best thing for her to do is to move back to her homeland, to Canaan, the Promised Land, because she was a foreigner and there was no welfare system in Moab. There was no church to take care of her. There was no help. Her daughters in law who were also battling loneliness were so attached to her that they decided they were going to move with her. They were going to leave their land of Moab and go back to the Promised Land with Naomi. About half way down the road Naomi tried to turn them around. She said, "Girls you don't need the baggage of a mother in law hanging on to you. You need a man. Go back home and find another man." One of them Orpah took her up on the offer.

So Orpah turns around and goes back. But the other daughter in law, Ruth, insisted on going with Naomi. Ruth makes this statement to Naomi in Ruth 1:16-17 (NIV) *"But Ruth replied, 'Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. 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. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.'"* "Where you go I will go." That's a verse you've probably heard before. This statement was made from a daughter in law to her mother in law. So is this a typical relationship we're talking about here? A daughter in law turns to her mother in law and says, where you go I will go. I predict that's a tradition that will not catch on.

So Ruth and Naomi, they take this adventuresome trip to Naomi's hometown, Bethlehem. All of a sudden we get our first clue as to why this story is important to the Christmas story. Why this story is so important to the Bible. Bethlehem is less than two hundred people. That's why we sing, "O little town of Bethlehem." Less than two hundred people. So when Naomi returns it's big news. The people started to talk: Is that Naomi? Is she back in town? Remember her name means pleasant or sweet. So Naomi says to them, don't call me that any more. It's in Ruth 1:20-21 (NIV) *"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. [Don't call me pleasant. Don't call me sweet.] '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...[pleasant and sweet?] The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."*

Can you just see the expression on her face as she says that? She's angry. She's mad at God. He's not held up his end of the deal. I wanted a toy, God! I wanted a toy! So as you read the story, you think Naomi's story has basically been a story about loss. She's lost her husband. She's lost her sons. She's lost her home. She's lost her land. It's a story about loss. But here's the question I want to ask you. Does the story have to be about loss? She lived in a lot of incredible pain. But is that what it has to be about?

Gerald Sittser was in a car accident, hit by a drunk driver in his minivan. In the accident he lost three generations in his family. He lost his mother, he lost his wife and he lost his young daughter. He wasn't even hurt. He wrote a book about his journey of grief called *A Grace Disguised*. I like that title. Here's what he says, "The experience of loss does not need to be the defining moment of our story." It's one thing for me to say that; it's another thing for him to say that. "The experience of loss does not need to be the defining moment of our story. The defining moment can be our response to the loss. The story doesn't have to be about the loss. The story can be about responding to the loss."

In other words we don't get to decide what roles we play in life. But we can decide how we play the roles that we're given. So you reach this point in loss, you reach this point in your story, in your journey where you have to decide. Is your story going to be defined by the loss or could your story be about something else? Could it be something different? That's hard. We tend to get focused on what's right in front of us. There's this thing in the box and we want what's in the box and we open it up and we're disappointed when it's underwear instead of a toy. It's not what we hoped

for. But here's what we're going to see in this story. If there's one word to describe Naomi's life, it's not loss. It's redemption.

Once Ruth and Naomi arrive on this adventure to Bethlehem, Ruth goes into the fields and she begins picking up grain left behind by the harvesters. It was the season to harvest barley. Why did she do that? Because she had to go to work. There was nobody else to support them. There was no welfare system. In fact the welfare system of Israel in that day, there was a law that required the farmer to leave the left over grain in the fields so the poor could come in and get it. So Ruth starts picking up the leftover grain. Not a very glamorous job. It'd be like someone who walks along picking up aluminum cans across the highway or the sidewalk for a living. But you have to respect her for starting somewhere.

It was there that Ruth gets noticed by the last main character in this story, a wealthy single guy who had never married, whose name was Boaz, the owner of the field. Boaz takes notice of her. Ruth 2:3 (NIV) says, *"So she went out and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech."* As it turned out. Wouldn't you know, coincidentally, totally by chance, as it turned out, it just so happened, she ends up working in the field of Boaz. Boaz is this wealthy, single, godly guy who had never married, who unbeknownst to Ruth is a relative of her late husband.

To make a long story short Boaz notices Ruth. He likes her. He befriends her. So when Naomi gets the scoop on the situation she decides to play cupid and she says to Ruth, "Here's what I want you to do tonight. You get a shower and fix your hair up. You put on your best perfume and your prettiest clothes. Then I want you to go to the barn where Boaz is working. After he is done eating he's going to lie down in the barn and go to sleep. And when he does, you go and lie down at his feet and he will tell you what to do from there." Now at this point you might be thinking, what is Naomi telling Ruth to do here? It's not what you think! This is the furthest thing from a hook up. She's actually telling her to prepare herself as a bride and to make a proposal to announce that she's interested, she's available, she's willing to relocate. She's actually a very liberated woman.

So what happened next? Ruth 3:8-9 (TLB) *"Suddenly, around midnight, he wakened and sat up, startled. There was a woman lying at his feet! 'Who are you?' he demanded. [It's dark. He's just waking up wiping the sleep out of his eyes. He can't see.] 'It's I, sir-Ruth,' she replied. 'Make me your wife according to God's law, for you are my close relative.'* [So Boaz says] *'Thank God for a girl like you!' [I guess so!] Now don't worry about a thing, my child. I'll handle all the details for everyone*

*knows what a wonderful person you are.*" Isn't that a great story? I think this is such a practical story. It has so many important implications for us especially in this Christmas season.

Boaz is what is called the guardian redeemer or kinsman redeemer. Let me explain the guardian redeemer law to you. When a man fell onto hard times and he was forced to sell his land, his nearest relative, the guardian redeemer, could buy the land. They would step in and purchase the land and keep the relative's property from coming under the ownership of another. I know that seems weird but it's how it was set up in that day so the property wouldn't be lost to another tribe or another family. So Boaz comes along and says "I will take the property of Elimelech and I will take responsibility for Ruth." Because he also had to take responsibility for the family members at that time.

That is no small act of kindness and sacrifice here. Especially when you consider that Ruth is a Moabite, she's a foreigner, she's from a pagan culture. No man in that culture would want a woman like Ruth. But Boaz says "I will love who no one else will love. I will care for who no one else will care for, I will redeem who no one else will redeem. I will be the guardian redeemer." Boaz falls for Ruth. He makes his plan to redeem Ruth as the guardian redeemer. But actually there was a closer relative than Boaz who had the right of first refusal. So Boaz goes to the guy who has the right of first refusal on the land. He's thinking how he can play this because he really liked Ruth. "He says, 'There's this land you can redeem,' he says to the other relative, 'if you want to. And one other thing, the day you buy the land you also acquire Ruth, the Moabitess. You know that woman from the foreign culture, that pagan, the dead man's widow. You'll have to marry her too, in order to maintain the deed on the property.'"

Isn't that great? It's like you go to buy a house and you wonder why it's so cheap. The realtor tells you, "There's a mother in law upstairs and she stays with the house. You'll really enjoy her, I'm sure." At that point the guy says, you can redeem the land Boaz. So in the last chapter in the book of Ruth we read in Ruth 4:13 (NIV) "*So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.*" What a beautiful story! This is just an amazing man. He had no legal obligation to do this. It was just pure grace. What did Boaz get in the deal? He gets an awesome wife. What was Boaz's life like before this moment? Ruth-less. Boaz comes along and he says, I will buy the property. I will take responsibility. And he goes out of his way to redeem this foreign woman.

As it turns out some of you may even know who Boaz' mother is. Remember when the Israelites were about to overtake the Promised Land and they sent two spies into Jericho and they were housed and protected by a prostitute in that city name Rahab. As it turns out Rahab later had a son. Boaz. As it turned out he grew up to be a godly man. Perhaps because his own mother had been from a foreign land and a foreign culture. And she changed from following pagan gods to the one true God of Israel, Boaz then was able to show comfort and grace and protection and generosity to Ruth.

You think about this story and it's like a Christmas present was opened and it looked really dumb on the outside of the box. Everything is bad for Ruth and Naomi. But then over time as they unfolded the pairs of socks what they found was better than they ever could have imagined. What I'm saying to you today is that some of you, you think this Christmas you're going to get just what you want. It's just the right size, it's about the right weight. You shake it and you decide to open it up. You tear open the package, you're anxious to see. This is it! And then you look at the box. Oh no! Addiction! Abuse! Loss! Loneliness. Unemployment. Pain. Cancer. This is not what I wanted! I wanted a toy!

But before Naomi and Ruth gave up they had to look inside the box. Because of this guardian redeemer Boaz, Ruth had a son. Naomi gained a grandson. She thought it was all over for her family. Both of her sons had died. Now because of this grandson there's hope in their family. And there's a future for them that is going to continue. This grandson would bring a great blessing to them. And ultimately would be the salvation of their family. The last picture we have of Naomi in the book of Ruth is she's holding and caring for her grandson. Important words in Ruth 4:17 (NIV) "*And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.*" Is this a cool story or what!!

Naomi's great great grandson is King David. Ruth's great grandson is King David. You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes you might just find you get what you need. Here's where this all comes together. When we get to the New Testament of the Bible and we get to Matthew 1 where the Christmas story begins and the genealogy of Jesus is beginning, here's what we read in Matthew 1. All these names are there. We find the family tree of Jesus. Right there is Rahab the prostitute from Jericho, right there in the genealogy of Jesus. The mother of Boaz who married the Moabite pagan woman Ruth and redeemed her. And they had a son named Obed who had a son named Jesse, who had a son named David.

Then years later in the city of Bethlehem. Why was Jesus born in the city of Bethlehem? Why did Mary and Joseph go there? Because they were from this line. They had to go back to where their lineage was to register for the census. Way down inside the box, where Naomi and Ruth couldn't even see, was Jesus waiting to be born from their family line. That's an awesome story right there! If you've unwrapped the box and you don't like what it says on the outside and from your perspective right now you can't see anything other than what it says, here's what I want to say to you before you give up. I know it's hard not to give up. You may feel like you're all prayed out. Before you give up remember that God still has a story. And loss does not have to define your story. But your response to the loss can.

A guy went out for a run one night. It was kind of dark. He was jogging through a cemetery. He inadvertently fell into a freshly dug grave, this big hole in the ground. He immediately started to climb out but it was too deep. He couldn't get out. He tried jumping and he couldn't get out. He yelled for help and nobody could hear him. He thought I'm going to have to spend the night here so he sat down in the corner of that freshly dug grave to just wait until morning. But a little bit later that night, it was still dark, another jogger came through the cemetery and fell in the same hole. This guy started to jump, trying to get out. Then all of a sudden he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard a voice say, you can't get out of here. But he did.

Maybe you don't think you can make it through the Christmas season because you don't like what's on the outside of the box. But through Jesus Christ, your guardian redeemer, you can. Jesus came to bring you hope. That's why he came. And he's the one who knows that loss does not have to be your story. But how you respond to it. In Matthew 11:28 (NLT) "*Jesus said, 'Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'*" He meant that. And he's the one that can bring hope to you this Christmas. There was a bloodstained cross that on the outside looked like it was the end of the story, like a really bad story. But when you look deep inside the tomb, it was empty. And it's still the greatest story in history. That living God wants to be your God this Christmas season.

Blessings,

Scott

