

## Ruth Introduction, and Chapter 1 – John Karmelich

1. Before I talk about the book of Ruth itself, I want to give my lesson title first, as it helps to explain why Chapter 1 is here: It is, "How do we know when we're doing God's will and what do we do when we mess up?" One of the biggest things Christians ponder is, "Am I doing what God wants me to do right now?" Most of the decisions we make in life aren't exactly like situations that we'll read in bible stories. That's why many Christians ponder if the decisions they make are His will? What I've learned over many years of living out the Christian life is, if we are living by principals as taught in the bible, then we're free to make the best decisions possible given the situation that's in front of us. If you know you're not violating any specific biblical principal, do what seems best to do and let God guide you based on making what's the best decision possible at that moment.
  - a) The reason I state all of that first, is that's the type of situation we're going to read about in this opening chapter. The secondary characters in this chapter make decisions that violate God's rules for their lives and they suffer bad consequences for those choices. At the same time, we'll read of the main characters making decisions that are biblically sound and God blesses them for those good choices.
    - i) To keep it simple, bad (unbiblical) choices were made and people suffered badly.
    - ii) Good (biblically sound) choices were made by others, and they prospered.
  - b) OK John, like you said in the introduction, most of the decisions I have to make in life are not exactly those described in the bible, let alone this book. The same situation is true for those we'll about in this story. It's not like they were going to church and decided to skip it for a while. The characters in this story had to make some tough choices based on what circumstances they were facing. In some cases those decisions were bad because they did violate God's principals for their lives. The heroes of this story rebound from the decisions made by others, and become the "heroes" as they then lived as God desired they do so.
  - c) My main point here is I don't want you to read the book of Ruth based on what happened to a bunch of people millenniums ago. What I want each of us to understand is that those same biblical principals that the characters in this story should live by also apply to us as we live out our Christian lives.
  - d) Before I move on to describing this book, what about nonbelievers? Aren't there masses of people who succeed in this life without caring about God's laws? Of course there are. We just have to realize that whatever success they get in this life is it. We Christians have to realize that as we choose to live to do God's will for ourselves brings us far greater joy than any and all than pleasures that this life has to offer outside of doing His will.
2. With that strange introduction completed, welcome to my study of the book of Ruth. It's one of the shortest books in the Old Testament, being only four chapters. It's considered great literature and a wonderful story to study. While the story itself is interesting and fun to read, what I really care about is how we as believing Christians are to apply it to our life. As those of you who read my studies on a regular basis know, my favorite question to ponder in these studies is, "I believe in Jesus, now what?" The "now what" is about learning to apply biblical principals to our lives so we can use the most valuable thing God gives us, our time, so we can make a difference for Him.
  - a) Let me ask that "now what" question another way: Would you like more joy in your life? There's no greater way to have joy than to use our lives to help others draw closer to God. He wants us to draw on upon His strength so that we use His power to make a difference in the world we live in. That will bring you and me far more joy than any other thing we can seek in life.
  - b) But don't we still have to earn a living and say, take care of our homes? Of course. All I am saying is be a good witness for Jesus as we do those things and use the time God has given us to be a good witness for Him. That'll bring joy to each of our lives.

3. OK, enough of all that. About the book of Ruth itself. Let me give you the who, what when and where's of this book, so you can understand the setting of the story. I'll also quickly go over the main points of Chapter 1 to complete my introduction.
- a) Let's start with the "who". There are two main characters in this story. Ruth herself is not an Israelite, but a woman who came from a foreign country (called Moabite) which to put it simply, was just east of Israel. The other main character is her mother in law, a Jewish woman named Naomi. The short version of this whole book is Naomi, her husband and her two sons moved from Israel to Moab to avoid a famine. While living in Moab, all the men I just mentioned died. Both of Naomi's sons took Moabite wives before they died in that country. Naomi decides then to move back to Israel and one of her daughter's in law (Ruth) goes with her. The book is about the "redemption" of both Naomi and Ruth after they decided to do God's will by living under His care within the land of Israel. To give each of us the key underlying point of this lesson, good happens when these women seek God to help them in their troubles and He blesses their lives when they seek Him.
    - i) What that means for you and me is that when we do seek God and live the life as He desires we live, we'll have more joy in our lives than when we turn from Him.
    - ii) By the way, there are other "who's" that come up in later chapters. They include a relative of Naomi who ends up marrying Ruth and "saves the day" for these main characters in the story. However, I don't want to jump ahead of Chapter 1 other than to say this story has a wonderful happy ending.
  - b) Next, let me quickly talk about when and where. The where's in Israel and in the adjacent country of Moab that existed at that time. To explain the "when", I need to recount a brief history of the nation of Israel. The Israelite nation came from a man who had twelve sons from four different women. Those twelve sons and their families then lived in Egypt for 400 years. After all that time, they grew to become several million people. By a series of great miracles, God got them out of Egypt and 40 years later settled in the land of Israel as they are today. After that time, they didn't have any king over them for another 400 years until the first King was named Saul and the second one is the more famous King David.
    - i) My point is the story of Ruth takes place during the 400 year period before Israel had any king rule over them. The story of Ruth takes place late in that period as the last chapter of this book states that Ruth was the great grandmother of David. Therefore, if we know David was king roughly around 1,000 BC, this story takes place about 100 years prior to that event.
    - ii) Naomi and Ruth are not "royalty" as there was no royalty in Israel at that time. It is a story of two common people who a century later were the ancestors of royalty and became part of the family line was used to bring Jesus into our world.
  - c) In summary, Ruth is a wonderful cute story that was divided into four chapters about two millenniums after it took place. Jewish religious scholars accepted it as God-Inspired as it became part of what we call today the Old Testament many centuries before Jesus walked the earth. The way we read it now with four chapters, didn't come about the time that the printing press was first invented again, which is very roughly 1,000 AD.
  - d) Oh, a quick comment on who wrote Ruth: The author isn't stated. Jewish tradition is the prophet Samuel wrote it, which is feasible. Samuel wrote some of 1st Samuel. Israelites would be curious about David's background as their king and Ruth gives some history of David's family lineage from Naomi to David himself.
4. With all that said, let me close my introduction by coming back to my lesson title: "How do we know when we're doing God's will and what do we do when we mess up? I gave that title, as we will read in Chapter 1 of violations of Old Testament law by Naomi's husband and her two sons. The text doesn't say they died due to their decisions, but what is obvious is that they had to pay the consequences for those sins and didn't prosper in their lives. The good news is God can and does use even situations where we mess up for His will to get done as we'll read in this story.

5. Ruth Chapter 1, Verse 1: In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. <sup>2</sup> The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.
- a) The book opens by describing the "when". In my introduction, I talked about the fact that Israel lived without a king from the time Joshua first conquered that land until King Saul was crowned king as discussed in 1st Samuel. If we know King David was the 2nd king as stated in that book and Chapter 4 of Ruth states that Ruth was the great grandmother of king David, that'd mean this story is roughly 100 years prior to King David. If David was the king of Israel around 1,000 BC, figure this story takes place around 1,100 BC.
  - b) The more I thought about it, the more I realized the reason we get this story is so that the Israelites could ponder a little more about David's background. If David was known as the king who would be of the lineage of the Messiah, a little background on his family is a nice touch to add to history. Let alone the fact that this book was made part of the cannon of Scripture as it is a wonderful model as to how us Gentiles (non-Jews) become "brought into" God's family, but more on that later.
  - c) Back to Verse 1. This story takes place in Bethlehem. This is a town in Israel where David was from. The word "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread". All you should remember is it is a town where wheat is grown to make bread. Verse 1 says a famine occurred when the story takes place. When there was a famine in that world, it usually meant that God was trying to "get people's attention" focused upon Him. It's realizing, "there's a big sin going on" and I (God) am trying to get everyone's attention so my people turn back to me. So if we're experiencing a drought, does that mean God's trying to get our collective attention? Can be, but like the people in this story, we don't know for sure.
    - i) What I do know from American history is that during times of famine, people who are not religious will often pray for rain, as they're desperate enough to be willing to try anything to change their economic condition. My point is I'm convinced He works behind the scenes allowing difficult times often to get our collective focus upon Him in order for Him to guide our lives.
    - ii) So am I positive God caused this famine? I am positive God allowed it in order to test those living there at that time, and that's my point here.
  - d) At this point we get introduced to the characters of this story: A man named Elimelech and his wife is Naomi. They have two sons named Mahlon and Kilion. Realize that the men in this story die pretty soon, so focus on the women's names to remember. I found it interesting that the husband's name means "One who fears God", as if to remind us that the husband was the type of man who cares about pleasing God. I bring that up here as in the law given by Moses, it was forbidden for Israelites to live in the land of Moab.
    - i) A quick history of the land of Moab is necessary here to understand the story. The history of Moab is that he was the descendant of a sexual relationship between Lot and his daughter (See Genesis 19:36) when Lot thought the whole world was gone like the days of the flood. The Moabites then settled in the area southeast of where Israel is today. When the Israelites first traveled from Egypt to Israel, they had to go around Moabite territory, as the Moabites wouldn't let the Israelites go through where they lived.
    - ii) I give all this background as to return to my lesson title of making good decisions. God wanted the Israelites at that time to live together in that land. He didn't want them to go live outside of Israel, let alone in Moab. This is about making decisions in life that are pleasing to God. If a famine occurred in Bethlehem, they could pray to God or at the worst move elsewhere in Israel and still be in God's will.

- e) Stop and consider the fact that the whole town didn't leave when this famine occurred. It was just this man and his wife who decided to split when things got tough. That alone is a proof that the decision to go live in Moab was not God's will for this man and his family.
  - f) By the way, the names of the two sons both mean "sickly" (in one form or another). It's a little like having two children and ever since they were babies, they were both always sick in one-way or another. It's another clue as to what will happen in the story next.
  - g) For those of us who know this story, all the main male characters in this chapter are going to die soon. Am I positive that's God's judgment for them not doing living where God did call them to live? Of course not. However, the point behind this chapter is about teaching us how to make the type of decisions God wants us to make: That is decisions that do not violate any of His laws, and the decision to go live in Moab was a violation of His laws.
  - h) If all of that is true, is it a violation today for Jewish people to live in the United States or another country in the world? No. Part of the reason they were scattered is due to all of the persecution they received over the millenniums. Do I believe all Jewish people should go live there today? I'm convinced God is working on His timing to gather them together back there, but until that becomes more obvious due to political events, Jewish people are free to live where they want today. Remember that we're living in the era of "God's grace" where salvation only comes by accepting Jesus as paying the full price for one's sins. This era of time will come to an end one day. It's as if God has a "clicker" and whenever some specific unknown to us, number of people get saved, that's when God focuses back upon the Jewish nation and at that unknown future time, I'm convinced it is essential for Jewish people to be living in that land again.
  - i) OK, enough prophesy for one moment, time to get back to the story. One last bit of bible trivia and then we can get back to the text. Verse 3 says that this family were "Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah". Don't let the word "Ephrathites" bother you. It just means this little family were natives of that area as part of the land allocated to the Israelites when it was first divided up tribe by tribe. Also keep in mind that as we read the narrative books of the Old Testament, we're working from the first Jewish person (Abraham) to the father of the line of the Messiah (David) and the story of Ruth gives us some background as to how David "came to be" with Ruth being the great grandmother of that future king. I am jumping ahead of the story, so let's get back to Naomi and her soon-to-be-dead family.
6. Verse 3: Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.
- a) The point of these verses is that Naomi and her husband moved to the country of Moab. At that time, both sons took wives who were Moabites. To make it simple, realize that a law that Moses commanded was that it was forbidden for Israelites to marry outside of their religion. (See Numbers 36:6). It's kind of like we Christians are commanded not to marry outside of their faith in 2nd Corinthians 6:14. Again, the issue for us is about the decisions we make in life that are not God's will and what are the consequences of making those decisions. Did all three of these men definitely die due to violating those laws? It's not stated in the text, but the point is God and does punish us when we violate His laws.
  - b) Think of it this way: Were those three men who died saved? No idea. It depends if they were trusting in God to guide their lives. However, in order to teach us not to violate any of God's laws, occasionally He'll take people "out of the ballgame" in order to get the point across that we're to take His laws seriously. Let me put it this way: If we murder or steal, we will suffer for those sins in this lifetime, but our salvation is only dependant on if we believe Jesus died for all our sins and He is God.
  - c) That leads me back to this story. However the men died, the wife Naomi is now "empty".

- d) Naomi is now living in a land that is not part of Israel with two daughters in law as her only means of survival. Realize in that culture, men and women usually married in their teen's when they are old enough to produce children. Realize that the two girls who are Naomi's daughters in law are both still young and can easily have more children if they remarry.
  - e) One has to realize that a widow with no means of support was the "lowest of lows" in that type of society. Naomi's only means of support would be if her daughters in law agreed to remarry and then out of the kindness of their hearts support Naomi. Stop and think if one lost their entire family. First one has to deal with pain of that loss. Then they'd have to go deal with fact that one will have a very hard time going on living. The fact coming up that both girls cared for Naomi is a great statement of her character and being a good type of witness for God despite the horrible circumstances.
    - i) Think about it this way: If God allows us to go through a tragedy, even if that was due to decisions we make that violate His laws for our lives, God still wants us to come back to Him and have a relationship with Him. My point is despite what we have to face in life, it's never too late to be a good witness for God and do His will.
    - ii) In this part of the story we'll read of Naomi's daughters in law still carrying about Naomi, which shows the strength of her character and her being a witness for God despite all of this tragedy.
7. Verse 6: When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.<sup>7</sup> With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.
- a) Realize that this was a time period before modern communication. For Naomi to find out that the famine was over, it would take a "coincidence" of another person traveling to and from Israel to Moab for Naomi to find out that the famine was over. In case you care, it is about a 50-75 mile journey from Bethlehem to Moab over some rough terrain and through some desert territory as well as significant changes in elevation. My point is God worked it out for the news to travel to Naomi despite the difficulty in reaching her that way.
  - b) So why would Naomi be motivated to move back to Israel? One reason is Deuteronomy 24 lays out a welfare system for the suffering, in that farmers were required to leave parts of their farmland for the desolate to gather what the farmers didn't cut. I don't know how generous the Moabites would be to desolate widows, but I'm positive Naomi thought her chances of survival would be much better in the land of Israel, so she made the decision to go return home for that reason.
8. Verse 8: Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me."<sup>9</sup> May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud<sup>10</sup> and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."
- a) Visualize a big "goodbye scene". What Naomi is saying here is, both of you girls are still young and can both remarry. The locals won't hold it against you that you're widows. If you go back to your parents, they could marry you off to other men who could take care of you both the rest of your lives.
  - b) Remember that Naomi is now getting older. For her to live on the Israelite welfare system of gathering leftover wheat would be a tough life for her. Having younger women to help with that work would make life easier for her. Yet, she wants to do what's best for others as opposed to herself. I find one of the best things to do in tough times is to be helpful to others also in need and then trust that God will help us get through our own difficulties.
  - c) I'm convinced Naomi loved both girls and did what was best for them, and not her here. What's best for the two girls would be to go back to their parents and find new husbands.

9. Verse 11: But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me--even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons-- <sup>13</sup> would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!"
- a) One of my favorite bible commentator's (Chuck Missler) said, "It's best to read these lines with a good New York Jewish accent." I say that because the "Jewishness" of what Naomi is saying comes across here. To understand what's going here, I need to give a little more background on Jewish customs. One of them is if a man dies and has no children, it's the duty of any brother of the dead man to literally take Naomi as a second wife and raise up children in the name of the dead brother. (See Deuteronomy 25:5-6 for this).
- i) I have no idea of Naomi's dead husband even had brothers. The reason all of that is important is Naomi is in effect stating that law here in these verses.
- ii) To paraphrase Naomi, "Hey, even if I have another son from my late husband's brother's, you two girls can't wait until they grow up to marry them. Therefore, the best thing for you girls to do is to go back to parents and have them marry you off again."
- b) With all that said, notice the sorrow that Naomi is dealing with. In Verse 13 she says she's bitter due to the loss of her husband and her two sons, and she also said, "God's hand is against her".
- i) Stop and consider that if Naomi is so mad at God, why is she going back to Israel?
- ii) If she blames God for her misfortunes, then why abandon her daughters in law to go return to her homeland? What I suspect is the answer is she's hoping she'll be able to live off the generosity of other family members, plus the Israelite welfare system of gathering crops. (See Leviticus 23:22, about that welfare law.)
- iii) My point is despite her misfortunes, she's turning back to God and God's people for help. Which leads to you and me. God never promises all will go well in our lives. He never promises we don't have to deal with tragedies. As I often lecture, the Christian isn't supposed to be happy all the time, but we are supposed to have a sense of joy no matter what the circumstances. Naomi used the word "bitter" to describe herself in this chapter. Yes, she's angry because of her circumstances. At the same time, she realizes that the God of the Israelites is the same God who cares for her and she can always turn back to Him for help.
- iv) To put this another way, despite the fact that God let her lose her husband and her two sons, she's still willing to put her trust in Him for her future. As I like to state, eternity is a whole lot longer than this lifetime. To be honest, to live the Christian life is difficult at times. Tragedies do occur. Yet we can have joy despite whatever we have to deal with because we realize that we serve a God that loves us in spite of our mistakes and always wants us to turn back to Him so that we can use our messed up lives to serve Him. The more I ponder why God chose me, the more I realize it's not about my ability, but He choose me just because He did. Because He did, I'm always willing to turn back to Him like Naomi is here, so that we can use what time we have left to make a difference for Him. That is the great purpose one can have to live out one's life.
- c) In the next couple of verses, we get to the "amazing part". Naomi's attitude about trusting the God of the Hebrews, rubs off on her daughters in law. Remember that both girls were not raised in Jewish homes. They were both married off to foreign (Jewish) men and did not have any children by these men. Therefore they both realized they had to start over. Still, they wanted to be with Naomi as they saw her sincerity and her love for them.

10. Verse 14: At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup> "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."
- a) At this point, we have one daughter in law (Orpah) saying goodbye as she thinks the best thing for her is to go back to her parents. There are lots of Jewish legends about what did happen to Orpah, but again, they're just legends. In reality, she becomes a non-character for the rest of the book as the focus is on the lineage leading to King David, of which both Naomi and Ruth will become part of that lineage.
  - b) I have no idea if Ruth and Orpah are related outside of marriage. Most likely they're both about the same age and come from a similar non-Jewish background. Yet Orpah decided to go back to her parents and Ruth clung to her mother in law. Despite Naomi's pleading for Ruth to go to her parents, we'll read in the next verse that she decided to go with her mother in law to Israel.
11. Verse 16: 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. <sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup> When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.
- a) We've now come to the key plot point in this chapter. Ruth, who is not an Israelite states to her mother in law not only that she'll go with her back to Israel, but she'll also believe in the God of the Israelites for guidance. Notice the "Your God is My God" comment at the end of Verse 16.
  - b) Stop and consider what a positive influence Naomi must have been on Ruth. Naomi was a woman living in a foreign land. She went with her husband to the Moabite country. In this land she probably had a hand in marrying her two sons off to Moabite woman. Even with that change of scenery and influence, she never forgot her Jewish roots. She doesn't have anything else to "live for" her and makes the effort to go back to Israel.
    - i) The reason I'm making such a big deal about this, is one has to see it as a picture of how God always wants us to return to Him. She left Israel when things got tough. When she lost her whole family, in a sense she has nothing. God loves it when we have no other options left and are willing to come to Him empty handed. I know that God does His best redemptive work when we say or think, "That's it, I've got no where else to turn, let me put my life in God's hands and live at His mercy."
    - ii) Ok then, what about us Christians who are trusting in Him, "without being empty handed?" Even better. The bible is full of examples of God saying, "Let me work with you just as you are based on where you're at and let Me (God) use your life as it is for My glory." God's always willing to work with anyone willing to fully trust in Him no matter where we are in life. That's the great lesson of this chapter.
    - iii) Want a practical set of instructions? Simply pray, "Dear God, I don't know what is going to happen to me today. I have plans, but I don't know what the results will be. I just know my life is in Your hands and I want to do Your will for my life. As I go through my day, make it obvious to Me how I can do Your will and guide me to make the type of decisions that are pleasing to You in what I do". Personally I find that God can't resist a prayer like that, as we're putting our lives in His hands.
    - iv) Let me put it this way: would you like a prayer that you're sure will be answered? Then pray for surrender of our will to His and watch Him work as we trust in Him to guide our lives. It's amazing to consider and practice that concept.
    - v) Believe it or not, that's what we're reading Naomi do in this text. She's saying that my life hasn't gone well, and I don't know what to do next. All I know is that God does rule over this world, and I'm putting my trust in His hands to guide me.

- c) Now that I've beaten to death Naomi's perspective here, let me discuss what Ruth did and why it's significant to us: This is a girl, probably a teenager at the oldest who's lived all of her life in a culture that doesn't worship the true and living God. Yet she's willing to put her trust in a God that all she knows is based on the relatively short time she's lived in the same house as her mother in law.
- i) The point for you and me is from Naomi's standpoint, never underestimate what type of influence we can be to others. Despite living in a culture where it seems like no one around us cares about God, if we take the time and more importantly live the life style based on trusting God to guide our lives, that is a great witness to others about the God who controls everything.
  - ii) Consider Ruth: All she knew about the God of the Israelites is based on how she saw Naomi act. Ruth saw Naomi lose everything she loved, but is still willing to trust in her God despite that sorrow. That's how to have joy in one's heart despite what one is going through. Did Ruth have any idea what a commitment to God is going to be all about? Of course not. Did Naomi immediately lecture Ruth about say, the 10 Commandments or what's expected of her? Of course not. To begin to trust in the God of the Universe for guidance doesn't require us to lecture them on say, "Ok, you believe in God, now do this or that!" What God expects of us is to be a good witness to them based on how we live and if people are truly interested in growing in their relationship with God, they'll follow through.
  - iii) All we know of Ruth at this point is she's willing to trust God and trust Naomi as to teach her more about God as Ruth will follow Naomi into the land of Israel.
  - iv) By the way, if you haven't figured it out by now, this little story is a great example of how God wants us to be a witness to Him. It's not so much the words we say as it is the lifestyle we live as we become a witness for Him. Ruth is a great example of a non-Jewish person converting to serve the true and living God based on how she saw someone who did believe in God act. In a way, it's a model of how God's working on non-Jewish people to believe in the "God of the Jewish people" for all of our salvation.
- d) With all that said, it's time to return to the text itself. Ruth made this wonderful confession of faith in these verses. She said she's willing to die in the land of Israel. The point is not about where we should die as much as where we should live. No not in Israel, but living in God's will for our lives no matter what the cost
- e) Recall that Naomi gave a speech earlier in the chapter urging both of her daughters in law to go return to their parents so they could be wed off again. We tend to think that being a good witness for God always entails telling others to follow us. Naomi started by saying in effect, "Do what's best for yourself and may God guide you." When we see others who are willing to trust in God by "letting go" that's when we offer (not force) to help them to draw closer to God by leading by example how we turn our lives over to Him. That is the scene that just played out in these verses.
- f) All of that leads to Verse 18. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to travel to Israel with her, she (Naomi) agreed, not because it was best for her, but only because Ruth was not willing to change her mind at this point. It's sort of a strange way to be a witness for God. We usually think, "Hey you want to follow God, follow Me". Instead Naomi is effectively saying, "Do whatever you think is best for your life, but if you're determined to follow the true and living God, then if you're set in living that way, then I'm willing to let you follow me as together we'll see how God can guide our lives so we can each make the type of difference for Him that He desires we make."
- g) Remember that Naomi benefits from having a young girl take care of her. Realize Naomi only succeeded because she was willing to let go and let God take over this situation.

12. Verse 19: 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?"
- a) Realize that traveling probably on foot from Moab to Bethlehem was no easy feat. It was a journey of about 50-75 miles through a desert through tough terrain and a large change in elevation. Realize they weren't robbed or even hurt by wild animals on that trip. All I am saying is the survival of that trip alone is a proof of God guiding them.
  - b) By the way, remember the famine that was in Bethlehem that was at the start of this story? Notice that Bethlehem still existed when Naomi came back. My point is God still looked out for those living under His care and no one starved to death there. It wasn't necessary for Naomi and her family to leave God's care in the first place. Yet we won't read of her being punished for coming home. If anything her willingness to trust in God despite all she's been through the last decade is proof that God's always willing to welcome us back into His guidance if we're willing to trust Him to guide our lives.
  - c) Realize that Bethlehem is a small town where everybody knew everyone. After 10 years, I would think that people would recognize Naomi immediately. What I suspect, is that the process of losing one's husband and one's children has "aged" Naomi more than her years due to her loss and her travels. I ponder if the reason people in that town didn't recognize Naomi is she's aged more than those lost years due to the toughness of her life. Remember she left Bethlehem as she thought she'd live a better life in a foreign land "not under God's care", and I suspect she aged more being "away from God" than she would if she'd stayed in that land through the famine of ten years ago.
  - d) Whether or not all of that is true, simply realize that Bethlehem is a small town, and news of any former residence returning is "news". That could simply be the reason for how she was greeted when she came back.
13. Verse 20: "Don't call me Naomi, " she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. <sup>21</sup> 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."
- a) To understand Verse 20, you need to understand what the words Naomi and Mara mean in Hebrew. The name Naomi means "pleasant". The name Mara means "bitter". If you're thinking Naomi is this wonderful pleasant witness for God, realize that she desired to be named "bitter" for the rest of her life due to the loss of her entire family. Remember that God does His best work on us when we realize we've got nothing to lose by our trust in Him to guide our lives. Even though Naomi is having a self induced pity party as she's back in her hometown, God's still willing to work through her because she's willing to put her life back in God's hands at this point in the story.
  - b) It's interesting to me to consider the fact that she blames God for her misfortunes as stated in Verse 21, yet despite that, she's still willing to trust God for the rest of her life. As she's calling her life bitter and blaming God for all of her loss, she's still willing to live there as she knows life under God's care is better than being desolate without His help in our life.
  - c) Ok John, this is a sad story up to this point, and I know there's more to the story. If we're trusting God to guide our lives, what is we're to learn from this sad story? The first thing is that no matter what the situation we have to deal with, the point is we can trust God to guide our lives even if He's allowed horrible things to occur. Naomi has every right now to feel bitter, as she's lost all she has. The same God she's trusting in now is the same one that allowed the loss in the first place. Naomi has no guarantee her life will be better now that she's living in Israel again. All she knows is that as a widow, the Israelites have put a system in place based on God's commands to care for those who have nothing. Therefore she has a better chance of living her "in God's care" than she has if she continued to live in the land of Moab. My point is about trusting God no matter what the circumstances.

14. Verse 22: So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.
- a) Let me remind all of us again that the word "Bethlehem" means "house of bread". All that means is that Bethlehem was a farming community that provided the main ingredient we use to make bread. Here both barley and wheat were harvested. Each of those crops are harvested a few weeks apart usually in the spring time. Harvesting is a time of hard work and a time of celebration as it was "pay day" for all who lived in that town.
  - b) I don't think Naomi planned her journey home hoping to arrive at harvest time. It's more about realizing she had nothing to gain by staying in Moab and her best option to live out a full life was to return to Israel so she could live off the generosity of others. An old joke in Judaism is that "Coincidence is not a kosher word". That idea just means that what we would consider a coincidence is God working in the background to work out our lives for His glory. At a time where labor is needed for work, and at a time where Ruth can work to collect crops that the worker's missed, "happens" to be the time when both girls arrived back at home.
  - c) To state the obvious, there is more to the story than this. As we wrap up this chapter, I'd like us to stand back and consider the big picture of why it's part of the bible:
    - i) For starters, it gives a nice background to King David's life, as Ruth was David's great grandmother. I'm speculating the story of how part of David's family came from Moab made a good story to tell David as a boy. As David became King, I'd suspect he told that story to whoever wrote it, (again, tradition is Samuel wrote it) and it gave the Israelites some background about David as they didn't know much about him prior to being king other than the fact he lead Israel to many victories.
    - ii) Even more than that the story of the Ruth became part of the bible as it teaches us how we can trust in God despite our losses and despite when we turn away from Him in our lives. It's a great example of how we can be a witness for God despite whatever difficulty we're facing at any given moment in time.
    - iii) It shows how we can have joy in our hearts despite of whatever sorrow we may be dealing with at any given time. It shows how we can be a good witness for God in times of sorrow and even lead others closer to God. When the going got rough for Naomi, is when she became a great witness for the God of the Universe to a point where her foreign daughter in law was willing to trust in her and use their lives in a way far greater than if she turned away.
    - iv) Think of it this way: Ruth is well known through all of history as being part of the bible and an ancestor of King David, let alone the Messiah. If Ruth decided to go back to her family in Moab, this story never would have happened. The point for you and me is never underestimate what God can do in our lives if we're willing to put our trust in Him for guidance.
  - d) On that happy note, I'll bring this lesson to an end. Let's pray
15. Heavenly Father, we thank You for including this story of the life of Ruth. Not so we can learn of the ancestral line of King David, but so that we can learn about redemption especially after we've made bad mistakes and turned against Your will. May this story be a reminder to us that the best way to live out our lives is by drawing close to You and making decisions that don't violate Your will for our lives as taught by Your commandments. Help us to remember when it seems like all of our options have run out, that's when You do Your best work so You and You alone get credit for how our life works out for Your glory. Help us to do whatever "footwork" You desire we do and trust that You are guiding us for Your glory as we use our lives to make a difference for You in all that we do. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.