

Seeking and Finding God

Ruth 1:1-14

I'm going to be talking about what happens when we reach the point at which we cease to know God. I am not necessarily talking about a situation in which our *belief* in God has been lost. I am talking about a life in which God is nominally present, but has no impact on the way we live. This can happen in two ways.

The first, and perhaps the most common, is a life in which God has become little more than a comforting idea, or a convenient reference point when someone asks us what we believe. We may go through all the motions of worship; we read our Bibles; we sing the hymns; we exhort from the platform; we put money in the collection bags... and then we go home and effectively forget God for a week.

'Am I a Christadelphian? Of course I am. I have a menorah in my lounge, a star of David in my dining room, and an inspiring quote on the toilet door. I homeschool my children, or I send them to a Christadelphian school. I attend ecclesial functions, and I wear formal clothes to the memorial meeting. That's how you know I'm a Christadelphian. Am I a Christian? Of course I am. I'm a Christadelphian—and Christadelphians are Christians, as you can see from the description I've just given you.'

What's missing here is any reference to motivation and belief: the most important aspects of the Christian life. They may be taken for granted, but what good is that unless we confirm they are still active? It's easy to lose sight of them

When this happens, God's presence in our lives has been reduced to little more than a sort of spiritual habit. We have convinced ourselves that the cultural behaviours of our community are evidence of spiritual fruit, and as long as we exhibit those behaviours we are in good standing with God. Our faith is no longer defined specifically by what we believe, but merely by the way we are perceived and the way we act. We have become cultural Christians, not faithful believers.

We start to do things simply because they've always been done; we start to do them in a certain way because that's the way they've always been done.

Our focus shifts from simply being a Christian to maintaining a specific type of Christian institution. We find ourselves referring to this institution as if is equivalent to the religion it stands for. Before long, too much energy is devoted to behaviours and traditions that have very little to do with original Christianity.

But because these behaviours and traditions are so tightly bound to our collective identity, we are afraid to let them go. This is how the Jews drifted into certain practices that Jesus would later condemn, even though they appeared righteous.

That is one way in which we can lose God. I believe Naomi's family lost God in this way.

An alternative is a life in which the reality of God is only ever perceived through our trials. Perhaps we have suffered greatly, and we blame God for our suffering. Perhaps we are working hard in the ecclesia, but receive no recognition. Perhaps we conclude that God doesn't care about our efforts to serve Him. Perhaps we lose faith in His promises because He never seems to respond.

When this happens, we have pushed God out of our lives by placing ourselves at the centre of the universe. We have convinced ourselves that He is required to act in the way that we demand. And when He does not, we reject Him, whether consciously or unconsciously.

That is another way to lose God. Naomi's family lost God in this way too.

To put it simply: rediscovering God is a process that becomes necessary whenever our relationship with Him has broken down; when He no longer seems "real" to us; when He doesn't seem to hear; when we can't hear Him; or when a belief in Him doesn't make any difference to our lives. Rediscovering God is difficult not because He is hard to find, but because very often we are unaware that we've lost Him.

The story of Naomi and Ruth is not really about a family who left the household of faith and suffered for it. It's about *why* they left, and how one of them was restored.

It's easy to get carried away with Bible names and convince ourselves that their meaning is always significant—or at least, somehow relevant to the point we're trying to prove at any given time. So I tend to avoid drawing lessons from names unless they're very obvious. But Naomi herself confirms that names are important to this story so it's worth checking to see what they can tell us.

The head of Naomi's family was called 'Elimelech.' His name means 'God is king', which must have been painfully ironic for anyone living in the time of the judges, when there *was* no king and 'every man did that which was right in his own eyes.'

The fate of Elimelech's family echoes the fate of the Jewish nation. Both were damaged by a failure of leadership. Decades of peace and prosperity had bred complacency and apathy. As Israel's leaders fell one by one into a spiritual sleep, their pastoral role was neglected and the people's faith diminished.

Yet because the outward signs of religion were still present, nobody realised until it was too late. The judges did their best to restore the nation, but their influence was limited and shortlived.

With this in mind it is not difficult to understand why Elimelech chose to fend for himself when famine struck the land. He was not interested in the lifestyle of Moab; if he had been, he wouldn't have waited for a national disaster before moving.

Why did Elimelech go to Moab? Because he lacked faith in God? Absolutely. But also because he doubted the willingness or ability of his own community to support him. That is a lesson for us all by itself. Is our community a place where people are confident of finding support?

Elimelech knew he was taking a risk, but he thought he had the situation under control. He planned to return when life was more stable. We know this because he did not sell his land when he left Israel, even though there was no king or judge to stop him doing it. Later in the story, that land becomes a lifeline for his widow.

The sons of Elimelech were called Mahlon and Chilion. Their names mean 'sickness' and 'failing.' I don't know who thought that was a good idea, because they die without even reaching the end of Ruth Chapter 1. This does not necessarily mean they were bad people. But they were inconsistent. When their father died, they should have taken their mother back to Israel, and yet they did not. They wanted to find wives before they did anything else. And they were happy to do this in Moab. Let's look at Ruth 1:8. **(Read :8-10).**

Orpah and Ruth were good people. We know this from the way they treat Naomi. But they were not Jews. They were not even proselyte Jews. Naomi still refers to 'your people and your gods' when addressing Ruth. Ruth still refers to 'your people' and 'your God' when addressing Naomi.

Mahlon and Chilion were not concerned by this because they had acclimatised to their new environment. First they developed tolerance, and tolerance gave way to acceptance. Moab was a comfortable place to live, and they fitted in reasonably well. They were no longer separate, as they should have been. People knew they worshipped a different god, but we don't know what this actually involved in practical terms, and it doesn't seem to have distinguished them greatly from the Moabites.

Following the death of their father, Elimelech's sons would have felt grief; possibly anger, frustration, helplessness, and depression. Perhaps they met Orpah and Ruth during this process. Perhaps they found comfort and support from their wives. But at some point their faith was eroded, and with it their desire to return to Israel.

There's a very simple lesson behind all of this, and it's one that the Bible repeats incessantly, but it's still one of those lessons that we always find easiest to forget whenever it suits us.

And the lesson is this: if our contact with an unbelieving world becomes so great that our private lives are affected, we will invariably lose something of great value. Perhaps something material; perhaps something spiritual.

In the case of Mahlon and Chilion, it was their lives.

They became increasingly aimless once their father had died. Their behaviour was sporadic, with no clear direction. They had no commitment. No clear goals for the future. They died because they departed from the way, the truth and the life.

Mahlon and Chilion remind us of the Law of Moses. They could teach their wives the basic principles of salvation, but they could not carry these principles to a righteous conclusion.

In a similar way, the Law of Moses could provide the knowledge necessary for salvation, but it could not ultimately save. Yet we cannot appreciate or take part in the saving work of Christ unless we first understand the Law, which contains the principles upon which the New Covenant is based.

The same was true of Ruth. Her first husband was imperfect, offering only the *knowledge* of salvation without the final reward. How different was Boaz, her second husband.

How appropriate that she was released from the sickness and death which consumed Elimelech's sons, and was granted not just a new lease of life, but also a son to call her own.

This reminds us of our own situation. We ourselves are spiritual widows, having been loosed from an old husband that we might embrace the new. The old husband was the Law of Moses; the new husband is Christ, of whom Boaz is a type.

When Naomi returns to Israel, she is exhausted and despairing. Her name means 'my joy, my pleasant one.' Yet now she says 'Call me Mara: bitter. God has dealt very bitterly with me.' Mara was a place in the wilderness where God turned bitter water into sweet water to sustain His people. The story is in Exodus 15. Naomi reverses this. She accuses God of poisoning her.

She has lost her husband and her sons. She has no heir. All she has to show for her time in Moab is a foreign daughter in law, from a nation which is explicitly cursed by the Law of Moses. Ruth's name means 'companion', but who wants companionship with Moab? It's a humiliating return for the widow of Elimelech.

But the most important fact is that she *has* returned, and that her community restores her in love. The inspired writer acknowledges this by refusing to accept her change of name!

Instead he continues to call her Naomi, because in his eyes she has not changed. This is consistent with the themes of optimism and hope which run throughout the book. Eventually they will overcome Naomi's bitterness.

In Ruth chapter 2, we read of Naomi's kinsman, Boaz. His name means "In it is strength", and we find an appropriate allusion to this in **II Chronicles 3:17**. **[Read]**. Boaz was, quite literally, a pillar of the community.

He lived by faith and led by example.

- He commands his young men to treat Ruth with dignity and respect, even though she is a Moabitess.
- He obeys the Law of Moses and does not round the corners of his field, but leaves them for the poor to glean.
- He tells his reapers to leave extra corn upon the ground.
- He acknowledges that Ruth has made a commitment to God, and he commends her for her decision to become a proselyte Jew.

Yes Boaz is rich, but he is also generous. When the famine struck Israel, he chose to remain instead of escaping the hardship it brought. We might think that he could do this because he knew the famine would not affect him.

But this cannot be the case. Abraham had also been a wealthy man, yet he still moved to Egypt to avoid a famine. Boaz might not even have been a wealthy man when Elimelech left Israel; he could have been slowly working his way up in the family business. Perhaps he finally took over from his father, or inherited it unexpectedly. Whatever the case, Boaz didn't survive the famine because he was rich. He survived it because he was faithful.

Boaz is willing to provide assistance to the poor. He wants to share his wealth for the benefit of those around him. He does not leave the work to others, but is constantly involved in ecclesial life. He works alongside his servants, and does not ask them to do anything he would not do himself.

He knows them personally, and they know their master's voice.

Instead of returning to a comfortable bed at night, he sleeps in the threshingfloor because he wants to get straight back into the job as soon as he awakes.

He reminds others of their collective responsibility towards their brothers and sisters.

Naomi took a great risk by sending Ruth to Boaz at night. He could have rejected her and accused Naomi of attempting to damage his reputation for personal advantage.

He could have seduced her and used his influence in the community to keep the matter quiet. He could have destroyed Naomi's reputation completely. But he did none of these things.

There is something in the way Boaz responds which suggests he is an older, more mature man. Perhaps he realised that Ruth would only have come to him at Naomi's request. Perhaps he recognised the significance of sending her at night, when her physical beauty could not be seen and only her character was on display. Look at his reply in Ruth 3:10 (**read 3:10-11**).

Boaz gives full credit to the purity of Ruth's motives and the care she has shown for her mother-in-law. This is good evidence that Boaz realises Naomi is appealing to him through Ruth, which helps to explain why he trusted her so quickly.

Boaz sends Ruth home with 27 kilograms of barley. It's a message to Naomi; a promise of commitment. She will never need to work or beg. Boaz will provide for them all. We can almost hear Naomi high-fiving Ruth in chapter 3:18, where she says 'The man will not rest until he has taken care of the matter today!'

She is absolutely right. In chapter 4:3, Boaz recites the story of Naomi's life to the elders in the gate.

“Remember Elimelech?”, he says. “He’s dead now, but he was *our brother*, and his widow is still with us. What have we done for her? What have we done for our brother’s family?” When the nearer kinsman is not willing to redeem Ruth, Boaz performs this duty himself—and the best part is that he doesn’t do it out of duty; he does it out of love.

Boaz could sympathise with Ruth’s situation. Although he was not a proselyte himself, his own family contained Gentile roots. Boaz was descended from Rahab the harlot, and it is appropriate that he saves a Gentile woman by adopting her into the house of Israel.

So we read all these fantastic things about Boaz, and perhaps we say to ourselves “Well, that’s great, and it’s impressive, and Boaz is a great guy, and I wish I could be like him and do all the things that he did, but obviously I can’t because I’m not rich or powerful, and I’m not a pillar of my community, and let’s face it, modern life is difficult enough without trying to solve everyone’s problems for them”.

But if we think that we can’t do what Boaz did, we do ourselves a disservice.

Because Boaz did nothing that we cannot do. In fact, there’s a verse in the Bible which lists everything that Boaz did – and I defy anyone to read this verse and say “I can’t do any of that”.

So let's go there now. **James 1:27. [Read].** That's how easy it is to live a life of faith. That's 'practical Christianity', in a nutshell. That's all we need to sustain and build our community; to convert those who are faithless; to strengthen those who are weak in faith, to produce and nurture faithful young people.

Naomi came to realize this when she eventually rediscovered God.

She was inspired to seek Him when she saw how Ruth had responded. She realized that if God is happy to accept a new convert, He will be overjoyed when one of His former sheep returns to the fold.

Despite returning in anger and bitterness, Naomi had not forgotten her people. She had not forgotten that the only place she could find salvation, was within the household of faith, through a covenant relationship with the Father.

Naomi could not rediscover God in Moab. She could only recognise the *need* to rediscover him. If we spend our lives in ungodly places, we cannot complain when He is difficult to find.

By leaving Moab, Naomi was renewing her commitment to God. By offering her parcel of land as a dowry for Ruth, she was giving up all she had in order to make her peace with our Father.

Where else in Scripture do we find such an attitude? Turn with me to Mark 12:38. [Read :38-40]. What has she cast into the treasury? Two mites. One mite was a twentieth part of the Roman penny. The Greek word for “mite” is “*lepton*”, meaning “a leaf”. And it was so small, so light and so worthless that it may as well have been one.

By giving all she has to the temple treasury, this woman is giving her life to God. Each mite is a portion of her faith. And whether it be as small as a grain of mustard seed, or as lowly as a tiny parcel of land, in God’s eyes its real value is immeasurable.

- Naomi lost God when her faith was damaged by the loss of her family and her time outside her community
- Naomi sought God after realising that Ruth had found Him
- Boaz did nothing that we cannot do ourselves
- Naomi’s community received her with joy and love
- God blessed Naomi with a family to replace the one she had lost

What else do we learn from Naomi's experience?

(PPT slide).