

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But 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. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return 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. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

(Ruth 1:1–22)

Introduction

There is something that people, generally speaking, deeply appreciate about a good homecoming story. One of the websites that I enjoy, though I limit my visits there because it tends to take up so much time, is called Welcome Home Blog. This website collects and posts military surprise homecomings from around the world. I am typically emotionally unmoved by what I see on a screen, but Welcome Home Blog has some truly (and happily) tear-jerking homecomings.

Many of the military homecoming videos that appear on the website are accompanied by a music track. The audio track obviously differs from video to video, but a favourite among military homecoming video creators seems to be Skylar Grey's *Coming Home*, a song written particularly in celebration of returning soldiers. Listen to the lyrics of the chorus:

I'm coming home, I'm coming home,
tell the world I'm coming home.
Let the rain wash away all the pain of yesterday.
I know my kingdom awaits, and they've forgiven my mistakes:
I'm coming home, I'm coming home,
tell the world I'm coming.

It's a song about going back where you came from, and about fresh beginnings. It expresses the difficulties of having been away, but looks forward to better times having come home.

The Bible contains its fair share of homecoming stories. Abraham travelled to Egypt in Genesis 12:10 and came home in 13:1. Jacob fled to Aram in Genesis 27 and returned home in Genesis 33. The Jews faced exile in Babylon but eventually returned to the Promised Land (Ezra 1:1–3). The story of the prodigal son is a favourite in this particular genre (Luke 15:11–32).

A somewhat extended homecoming story is found in the book of Ruth. This little book, sandwiched between Judges and 1 Samuel, tells the story of Naomi, an Israelite woman who left the Promised Land with her family during a time of famine, and returned years later, widowed and childless, accompanied only by one daughter-in-law. It's a story of God's grace to Naomi and Ruth, and is a living illustration of the glorious truths of the gospel.

Daniel Bennett, pastor at Bethany Community Church in Washington, Illinois, preached through Ruth at our 2014 World Outreach Celebration. During that brief exposition, he observed that, really, the book of Ruth is the story of Naomi. She features most prominently in the story. I think he is right, and it is to this little book—and particularly chapter 1—that I wish to turn our attention in this study. For the sake of structure, we will consider this chapter under five broad headings.

The Historical Context

The opening five verses of chapter 1 set the scene for us. They provide us at once with historical and theological insight.

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

(Ruth 1:1-5)

The Chastening

The chapter opens with two important notes. The events recorded here took place, first, “when the judges ruled,” and, second, during a time of “famine.” If you are familiar with the history and theology of the Old Testament, you will immediately recognise the significance of a famine during the time of the judges.

The book of Judges records the history of the faithless generations that followed Joshua’s obedient generation. God had warned Israel that covenant faithlessness in the Promised Land would invite chastening, and one specific sanction threatened was famine (Leviticus 26:19; Deuteronomy 28:24). The famine that occasioned the events of these opening verses should therefore be understood as an act of divine chastening for covenant faithlessness.

The Characters

The opening verses also introduce us to several of the key characters in the story. In the Bible, names often have special significance, and that may well be the case here.

First, there was “a man of Bethlehem” named “Elimelech.” His name means “my God is king,” a somewhat ironic name for someone who lived when there was no king in Israel (including God) but everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

Elimelech’s wife’s name was “Naomi,” which means “my delight.” The significance of this name becomes apparent as the story unfolds.

Elimelech and Naomi had two sons, each with a really cool-sounding Jedi name, and which are oddly fitting when their meanings are considered. “Mahlon” means “sick” and “Chilion” means “pining.” Mahlon married a girl named “Orpah” (“gazelle”), while Chilion wed the woman whose name gives the book its title: Ruth (“friendship”).

The Calamities

The story of these verses is dreadful, and many interpreters view the opening verse as something of an omen. We are told that Elimelech made the decision to “sojourn” with his family in Moab (v. 1). To “sojourn” means “to stay a short time.” However, something happened in the period between v. 1 and

v. 2, because in the second verse we see that the family “remained there.” Literally, the Hebrew reads, “they were there.” The language suggests an indeterminate period of time, as if they were just hanging around aimlessly in Moab with no definite plan in mind. As it turns out, their “sojourn” ended up exceeding ten years, during which time Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion died, leaving behind three grieving widows.

The question over which interpreters are divided is whether or not it was the right decision for Elimelech to take his family to Moab.

Readers familiar with the Old Testament narrative immediately feel their spider-sense tingle at the mention of Moab. Moab himself was conceived in an incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter (Genesis 19:30–38). Balak, a Moabite king, had hired Balaam the prophet to curse Israel (Numbers 22). When that plan failed, Balak and Balaam hatched a plan to ensure that God’s judgement would fall on Israel. They persuaded the Moabites, in the blunt words of the ESV, to “whore” with Israel (Numbers 25), an act which secured divine justice. Moab had been one of the foreign nations to relentlessly oppress Israel during the days of the Judges (Judges 3). Moab became such a problem for Israel that God excluded any children born in an Israelite/Moabite marriage from entering the assembly of the Lord for ten generations (Deuteronomy 23:3–6). Clearly, the Moabites were a people to be avoided! In new covenant terms, Elimelech was moving his family to a place where there was no good local church, no solid Christian fellowship, and only hostile, godless influences. It hardly seems to have been the ideal place to raise a godly seed.

There was no fear of the true God in Moab. Some interpreters suggest that it was an act of defiant faithlessness for Elimelech to move his family to Moab. God had clearly defined the borders of the Promised Land, and the general trend of the Old Testament suggests that his people were safest and closest to him when they remained in that land. These interpreters judge the deaths of Elimelech and his sons to be acts of direct divine judgement upon the family. Indeed, Naomi herself interprets providence in this way just a little later in the chapter.

Others are more sympathetic to Elimelech’s plight. What other choice did he have? Should he have allowed his family to starve in Bethlehem (whose name, ironically, means “house of bread”) when there was ample food in Moab? If God gave Jacob his blessing to move his family to Egypt during a time of famine (Genesis 46:1–4), did Elimelech not have precedent to do the same?

The text doesn’t plainly speak one way or the other. The writer simply reports, in a very matter-of-fact fashion, that Elimelech took his family to Moab. The text likewise does not explicitly state that the deaths of the three men were acts of divine justice for a faithless decision. It is entirely possible that these conclusions are warranted, but they must be reached by reading between the lines, not by reading the text at surface level.

That being said, reading between the lines is something that the biblical writers seem to expect their readers to do, and this book is ripe soil for that endeavour. It may be going too far to suggest with absolute confidence that the three deaths were direct acts of divine justice, but the mention of the time of the judges immediately raises suspicion about the move that the family made.

Judges closes with these words: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25). Ruth immediately opens with the decision by Elimelech to move his family to Moab. It is significant, I think, that Elimelech made this decision, as far as we can tell, without consultation. Remember, during the time of the judges, “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

In part, that means that people ignored God's clearly revealed will and openly embraced sin. Elimelech, it seems, did what was right in his own eyes by forging ahead with the decision to move to Moab without consulting anyone. He moved because that was right in his own eyes. He did not seek counsel, but simply made the decision, seemingly on a pragmatic basis, to move.

This is not my major point of application in this study, but it is worthwhile considering: Where do you seek counsel when you have a big decision to make? Right now, as you read these words, you may be facing a life-altering decision. I am not talking about the decision between chicken or beef, but a decision about moving your family, or entering marriage, or changing a career, or adopting a child. If you are facing a big decision, have you sought counsel, or are you simply doing what is right in your own eyes? Even if the decision seems to be clearly a good thing (marriage and adoption are good things), they are big decisions that can have life-altering consequences. Have you sought counsel? After all, "without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed" (Proverbs 15:22).

A second point of minor and cautionary application may be worthwhile before we proceed. Elimelech and his family moved from the Promised Land to "sojourn" in Moab, but ended up there far longer than they probably anticipated. And it seems they did so because they made no deliberate effort to return: They simply "remained there." When you leave the "Promised Land"—when you wander from God—it is very easy to stay away longer than you expect if you are not deliberate about repentance and returning. If you have wandered, are you just remaining where you are, or are you deliberately taking steps to return to God?

The Homefront Communication

Ten years after settling in Moab, Naomi received word that the famine was over. "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food" (v. 6).

The communication she received was not in the form of visual confirmation. She was not tagged in a Facebook post by a relative in Bethlehem. There were no Instagram photos of family feasts back home, and no satellite news coverage of burgeoning harvests in the Promised Land. She simply "heard in the fields of Moab" that the famine was over. It was a rumour, but one that she was inclined to believe and on which she was determined to act.

To her, the choice was simple: There was food back home, and it was time to go back. As a widowed foreigner in a godless society, she probably did not have to wrestle too long with the decision.

The Homebound Companions

What is more interesting is the fact that "she arose with her daughters-in-law to return." We don't know how long Mahlon and Chilion had been dead, but Orpah and Ruth had both remained loyal to their duty to their mother-in-law, as was (I am told) customary. It seems possible, given what follows, that she had grown a touch irritated with their presence, but they had remained with her nonetheless.

When it says that they "arose with" her "to return," it does not mean that they planned to accompany her until the border and then go back home, but that they planned to move with her to Bethlehem. As it turned out, the two women would ultimately head in opposite directions.

The Forthright Counsel

Both Orpah and Ruth expressed their intention to return to Bethlehem with Naomi. Naomi, however, had other plans.

So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But 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. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.”

(Ruth 1:7–13)

This scene that unfolds on the trip to Bethlehem is the source of much discussion. What drove Naomi to suggest to her daughters-in-law that they should return to Moab instead of accompanying her to Bethlehem? It hardly seems to be an effective church planting strategy to drive potential members away! Would it not have been more effective to have her daughters-in-law pray the sinner’s prayer, sign a church covenant, and begin serving in the crèche ministry? A number of possibilities have been suggested to explain her counsel.

First, an ancient Jewish custom suggests that, in the act of evangelism, the evangelist should always try three times to dissuade the potential convert. If she cannot be dissuaded in three attempts, she is the real deal. Naomi was perhaps employing some reverse psychology in her evangelism.

Second, the scene is somewhat reminiscent of the ancient Middle Eastern bartering system. In that system, it was expected that there would be some initial resistance, even though both parties knew that they were simply playing a game. An example of this game can be seen in Genesis 23, where Abraham purchased a plot of land from Ephron to Hittite to bury Sarah. Ephron initially rebuffed Abraham’s request to purchase the field, offering to give it to him for free. Abraham insisted on paying for it, and Ephron suggested a price of four hundred shekels of silver, an exorbitant amount for such a parcel of land. No doubt, he fully expected Abraham to counter his offer, at which point he would counter Abraham’s counter-offer until they settled on an amount. Abraham, however, was in no mood to play games and immediately agreed to pay the inflated price. From the outset, Abraham and Ephron were both aware that Abraham was going to pay for the land, but Ephron dutifully fulfilled cultural expectations by offering it for free.

It could be argued that a similar scene is being played out here. Perhaps Naomi assumed that the girls would rather remain in Moab, but, expecting them to offer some initial resistance, entered into a bartering deal, fully expecting them to ultimately return to Moab.

Third, it could be the case that Naomi was wisely calling her daughters-in-law to count the cost before relocating to Bethlehem. She had learned by first-hand experience that there may be a high cost to such life-altering decisions. Were they prepared to pay that cost?

A later biblical character also urged people to count the cost before taking up their cross and following him (Luke 14:25–33). He warned of the folly of building a tower or starting a war without first sitting down and calculating all the odds. Jesus highly emphasised the cost of discipleship (Luke 9:57–62), and many ultimately turned away from him because they weren't willing to pay the cost. Perhaps that was what motivated Naomi to make this suggestion.

But there is a fourth possibility that, reading between the lines, I think is perhaps most likely. I will explain this a little more fully below, but it seems quite possible that Naomi was simply feeling very bitter and sorry for herself, and that she wanted to return home all alone, not with faithful daughters-in-law, so that she could extract maximum sympathy from her friends and family in Bethlehem. A lonely widow would attract far more sympathy than a widow accompanied by two fiercely loyal daughters-in-law.

Ultimately, the text doesn't give her motives, and so we have to read between the lines a little if we wish to reach a conclusion, which is exactly what we will do below.

The Fearful Companion

The daughters-in-law initially responded to Naomi's counsel the same way, but ultimately followed different paths: "Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her" (v. 14).

Orpah's decision is dealt with very briefly. After some initial resistance (v. 10), she "kissed her mother-in-law" and went home. Had that been her intention all along? Was she genuinely dissuaded by Naomi's caution? We don't know. And it's not important to know. All we need to know is that fear of the unknown won the day. She chose to return to the comfort of familiarity rather than stepping out in faith. It made sense. She was still young enough to marry, and, for a widowed Moabite, prospects for marriage were far more likely in Moab than in Israel. Like a gazelle, she skipped off into the distance and faded into historical obscurity.

Interestingly, the Jewish Talmud, a collection of uninspired religious writings, tells us that, as she made her way home, she happened upon a battalion of one hundred soldiers. Willingly submitting herself to them, she fell pregnant and gave birth to the giant Goliath. Of course, that is nothing more than Jewish fable, but it illustrates the distaste with which the ancient Jews viewed her because of her decision to leave.

The Faithful Companion

Orpah counted the cost and was unwilling to pay it. Ruth was an altogether different animal. True to her name, her friendship toward her mother-in-law remained steadfast.

And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return 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. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."

(Ruth 1:15–17)

Orpah had “gone back to her people and to her gods,” and Naomi urged Ruth to follow suit. But Ruth would not be turned away. She stuck firm through the threefold attempt to dissuade her. She would not play the bartering game. She counted the cost and was willing to pay it. Her intentions were real and steadfast. She would not leave Naomi. She would live wherever Naomi chose to settle. She would adopt Naomi’s people as her own. She would worship the God that Naomi worshipped. She would live and die with her mother-in-law. Her commitment was clear, and her faith in the true God on display for all to see.

The Harsh Complaint

It is at this point that, reading between the lines, we may find some insight into Naomi’s motives for issuing the caution to her daughters-in-law. She was struggling with bitter disillusionment and self-pity.

And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

(Ruth 1:18–21)

There is a sense of foreboding in v. 18: “When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.” That may sound innocent enough at first glance, but Iain Duguid, an Old Testament professor and Hebrew scholar, tells us that the construction of the words “she said no more” literally means that she stopped talking to Ruth.

Think about that for a moment as you reread Ruth’s confession: “Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you” (vv. 16–18). We make fancy artwork from those words to hang on the walls of our living rooms. Brides and grooms cling to those words as a form of inspired wedding vow. We marvel at the faith of a young Gentile woman who was willing to abandon everything and everyone she loved in order to follow the God of Israel. But Naomi? She would not talk to Ruth! She maintained a stony silence.

As thanks for her profound profession of faith, Ruth received the silent treatment. How awkward that journey home must have been! And it didn’t get any better when they arrived in Bethlehem.

Naomi’s return caused quite the stir. She hadn’t been seen for ten years, and after losing her husband and her two sons, it would be surprising if she didn’t look a little older and greyer. But there was no mistaking it: It was indeed Naomi.

As friends and neighbours came over to welcome her home, she bristled at the sound of her name. “My delight?” She had no cause for delight, only bitterness. The Lord had deeply marred her, and she had long since determined to go to home affairs at the first suitable occasion to change her name to Mara: “bitterness.”

I have already noted my opinion of Naomi’s motivation in trying to send her daughters back to Moab. It seems to me that she was fishing for maximum pity back home, and her words to her countrywomen

seem to confirm this. “The LORD has brought me back empty,” she stated emphatically, if well-rehearsed.

How must Ruth have felt at this point? She had already endured the silent treatment for the fifty-kilometre journey from Moab to Bethlehem. And after her great confession of faith and selfless sacrifice, her mother-in-law still considered herself to be “empty”? Really? “Mom, I’m standing right here!” How it must have stung to hear Naomi’s bitter complaint.

But this is not Ruth’s story. It is Naomi’s. The text doesn’t focus on Ruth’s feelings, but on Naomi’s. And it offers us clear insight into how Naomi processed events.

At least as she interpreted things, God had punished her. She had left Bethlehem singing and returned lamenting. How the sights and sounds must have haunted her. How she must have remembered sweet days in the sun with her husband, and playful days in the fields with her young sons. It had all been so ideal, but now she was empty. And it was not by simple coincidence or mystical karma: It was “the LORD,” “the Almighty” who had “brought calamity” upon her. God had judged her for leaving Bethlehem—and it had destroyed her joy. Of course, we must acknowledge that, even if it *was* wrong to move to Moab, it wasn’t *her* decision; she had simply followed the lead of her husband. Nevertheless, she could not escape the haunting feeling that she would not have been widowed and childless if she had never moved. And this haunting feeling left her deeply bitter.

Bitterness is never acceptable (Ephesians 4:31), and I hardly want to commend the stony silence with which she rebuffed Ruth. However, there is at least one glimpse of hope here: She dealt in her bitterness with God. And we usually don’t have to worry too much about those who do business with God in their bitterness and disillusionment. When someone is bitter and disillusioned and turns their back on God, that is cause for concern. But those who are committed to dealing with God in their disillusionment are starting in the right direction. Naomi would make good progress in coming months and years, all because she started in the right place.

The Hopeful Conclusion

The chapter closes on a hopeful note: “So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest” (v. 22).

Do you see the strong contrast in the bookends of this chapter? Naomi left Bethlehem “when there was a famine in the land” (v. 1) and returned “at the beginning of barley harvest” (v. 22). Things were looking up! The scene was slowly changing. In the same way that the mention of the judges and the famine in v. 1 is a theological hint rather than a mere time stamp, so here the mention of the barley harvest is intended to be interpreted theologically rather than just chronologically. God’s favour was once again beginning to shine on his people.

But this closing verse also highlights the major theme of this opening chapter, which can be summarised in one small word: “returned.” Chapter one uses the English word “return” or “returned” no fewer than eight times (vv. 6, 7, 8, 10, 15, 16, 22). The Hebrew word is also translated “turn back” in vv. 11–12, “gone back” in v. 15, and “brought back” in v. 21. In all, the Hebrew word is used twelve times in these 22 verses. And that tells us everything we need to know about this chapter: It is the story about God’s people coming home.

The story of coming home is, in many respects, the story of the Bible. It is the story of the gospel. The homecoming story before us in Ruth 1 parallels the homecoming story of the gospel in at least five ways.

First, Naomi and Ruth came home because of *news*. Something concrete and historic had happened. They heard this news and responded to it. The gospel is likewise news. It is the story of events that took place in space-time history in order for God to rescue his people from their sins. God actually became a man. Jesus was born in space-time history, of a virgin, lived a sinless life on this earth, died on a cross and rose again from the dead. These are historical facts. The gospel is news.

Second, Naomi and Ruth came home because of *good* news. The news that Naomi heard was good. Things were looking positive back home. She could go back to Bethlehem. After ten years in a pagan land, how refreshing that news must have been to her! The gospel is also good news. (In fact, that is what the word “gospel” means.) Yes, it is news of a death. But it is also news of a resurrection. It is news of victory over sin and death. It is news of forgiveness. In an age in which we are exposed to so much bad news, the gospel is refreshing.

Third, Naomi and Ruth came home because of good news of *life*. It was barley harvest (v. 22), and the Lord had visited his people to give them food (v. 6). They had left Bethlehem ten years earlier because they faced death, but now there was news that the house of bread (Bethlehem) was able to sustain life. The gospel is a message of life. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish *but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). At the final judgement, there will be a separation of goats (unbelievers) from sheep (believers). The goats “will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into *eternal life*” (Matthew 25:46). The offer that is being held out to you in the gospel is the offer of life—*eternal* life.

Fourth, Naomi and Ruth came home because of good news of life that they *heard*. I have already alluded to this, but the news Naomi heard in the fields of Moab was news she simply had to believe. She had to accept it by faith. There was no photographic evidence. It was reported, and she needed to believe it. The gospel is likewise news that you are called to believe. The facts of the gospel have been reliably recorded by eyewitnesses, but those who will inherit eternal life must, by faith, believe the testimony of the witnesses. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), the rich man begged Abraham to send someone from the dead to share the gospel with his brothers. Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.... If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (vv. 29, 31). We have the written testimony of first-century eyewitnesses. We need nothing more to convince us of the truth. As you hear the good news of the gospel, you are called to believe it and to respond in repentance and faith. If you will not believe the life-giving message of the gospel, as reported by the eyewitnesses of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is no hope for you to escape eternal death. The message has been reported. The offer of life has been extended. Will you receive it by faith? After all, as the great Baptist theologian Andrew Fuller noted, “Faith in Christ is the duty of all men who hear, or have opportunity to hear, the gospel.”

Fifth, and finally, Naomi and Ruth *came home* because of good news of life that they heard. Naomi and Ruth heard good news, believed it, and responded in faith by coming home. They forsook the land of Moab and travelled back to Bethlehem. They counted the cost and were willing to pay it. The gospel calls for this kind of faith. John Blanchard has stated it well: “God has nowhere undertaken to forgive a sin that man is not prepared to forsake. Repentance is not an idea; it is action.” Or as John Mason

says, “Repentance begins in the humiliation of the heart and ends in the reformation of the life.” The gospel is a message that demands a response. The gospel tells us that, because of our sin, we have been alienated from God and earned death. But God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ, died a cruel and undeserved death on a cross for those he came to save, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven. Now, “he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). The call of the gospel is a call to repentance. And repentance requires turning your back on sin and walking in loving obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you are an unbeliever, the gospel of life calls you today to repent and believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Ruth was a woman who had no knowledge of the true God, until she heard the gospel from a family of foreigners living in Moab. But she believed the gospel, and God saved her. She became one of God’s people, and he became her God. If you, like Ruth, have no knowledge of the true God, repent of your sins and believe the gospel today, and you will be saved.

If you are a believer, perhaps you are living, spiritually, in Moab. Perhaps you have left the Promised Land, having embraced sin. Hear the call of the gospel today. There is bread in Bethlehem! Jesus is the bread of life, and he invited his people to come to him. “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30). Repent of your sin, embrace Jesus Christ afresh, and find rest for your soul.

AMEN