

Ruth

The Mothers of Jesus, Pt.2

In these weeks leading up to Christmas, we're looking at several women whose stories and lives are given to us in the Bible, and you might ask, "why?" Well, in the book of Matthew - Matthew being one of the four gospel writers along with Mark, Luke, John, who give us the life of Jesus in the New Testament - before Matthew gives us his account of the birth of Christ, the Christmas story, he gives us a genealogy of Jesus.

In those days, genealogies were much more important than they are today because today, the way you tell somebody who you are is you give them your résumé. You give them an account of your individual accomplishments and performances. You worked for this company and you went to this school, and so on. In those days it wasn't - we'll get back to this in a second - your individual accomplishments but your *family's* accomplishments that really mattered. Your genealogy *was* your résumé. This was how you could demonstrate who you were.

And so, what Matthew is doing is saying you cannot understand the birth of Christ, you can't just jump right into the Christmas story - it'll seem very sentimental and sweet but you can't understand what it *means* - unless you look at the family tree of Jesus.

In particular, at the forefathers and foremothers of Jesus, at their stories, at their lives, because their lives repeatedly point to who he is and what he's about.

So you just can't come in at the manger; you have to look at Jesus' family tree. One thing that's most interesting, especially to us modern people, is if you look at ancient family trees and genealogies, there are almost never any women in them. There's always the father-to-son thing. See, that's the patriarchy of the old societies, but interestingly enough - and we'll look at this passage from Matthew Ch. 1 next week - Jesus' genealogy has women in it - quite a few women actually. So we are calling them, "the Mothers of Jesus."

And we can learn from them and their stories; something about what Jesus coming and his birth, about what Christmas, means. Last week, we looked at Tamar - that was a wild ride. Today, we're looking at another one of Jesus' "mothers", Ruth. And my challenge today is that Ruth is a whole book in the Old Testament, not just a passage, and so I have to give you kind of a bird's-eye view of the story - so I won't hit it all, it might be good to go back and read through on your own; it's a very good story.

So let me give you the summary and then we'll see some lessons we can *glean* from it – that's a pun if you don't know the story. Here's how the story goes, and then we'll take three important teachings out of the story. And to start off, we actually have to meet *another* woman before we meet Ruth and that woman is Naomi. The **first stage** of the story is we see **The Emptiness of Naomi**. At the start of the story we are told that Naomi and her husband left their home in Israel – the economy was bad and they were looking for work – and so they moved to the neighboring nation of Moab with their two sons.

Those two sons married two Moabite women, but then disaster struck and Naomi lost her husband, who died, and her sons, who died. We don't know why, but all the men died. And so you have three widows now and, as we looked at last week, there were a lot of reasons why widows were the most socially and economically vulnerable members of those ancient societies. Because in that day and time, what you needed to make it in the world was not an education – as it is for us today – but what you needed was family – specifically spouse and kids.

So three widows, but Naomi though is in the worst shape because she's older. That means, first of all, she does not have parents she can go back to. Secondly, she doesn't have prospects of building a

new family. Thirdly, of course, now she doesn't have adult children with families who can support her – that was your social security back then as it still *is* in most parts of the world.

And so Naomi is miserable. When she returns to Israel you get a sense of her emotional picture. She gets back to Bethlehem – their home town - which is important when you remember Bethlehem's role in the Christmas story. And some of the people remember her from years before. They say, "Can this be Naomi?" And look what she says, **Ruth 1:20-21**, "*Don't call me Naomi, she told them. Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.*"

Debbie downer! But see, you have to understand in Hebrew, her name, Naomi means "sweet". So she's making a terribly sad world play on her own name. Mara means "bitter" - "Don't call me sweet, call me bitter." And yes, we understand that losing so many close loved ones in succession is some devastating grief, but this actually goes deeper than that. She's *nothing* now. That's hard for us to understand because it's just hard for us to get out of our culture.

But every culture tells you whether you're a somebody or a nobody, and it's very easy to look at other cultures and just sniff and say dismissively, "How could you call someone a nobody just because they didn't have a husband and a child? How primitive. How stupid. We're beyond all that." Okay, yeah, she shouldn't feel like a nobody. Some of you feel like a nobody because you're overweight. That would not have bothered Naomi at all – they didn't have yoga pants in the ancient Near East. Why are we so bothered by our weight? Why are we so bothered by our appearance in a way that didn't bother her? It's *our* culture. Everybody has a culture, and everybody gets their self-esteem, basically, out of what the culture tells them.

Her family line is about to die out. She has no name. She lived in a time in which if you didn't have a family name - see, we live in a time when even if we have a nice prominent family, but our *individual* accomplishments are no good, we feel like a nobody, but theirs was the reverse. Your individual accomplishments didn't matter. "Do I have a family? Do *they* have a name? Do I have a name that's living on? Do I have children? Grandchildren? Do I have a legacy?"

So Naomi has had everything taken away from her by life - *everything* - economic, social, psychological. She's devastated, and as the book opens she's about to go back to Israel. She has nowhere else to go, and she's going to go back to live an absolute dead-end life, a socially marginalized life, an economically marginalized life. That's where she is. And that's where we meet Ruth. This is the **second** thing we see, **The Courage of Ruth**.

Naomi's daughters-in-laws are Orpah and Ruth, **v.8-9**, "*Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.'* Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud."

She says, "Go back to your own families." Why? Well, because they are, at least, *young* widows, and if they go back to their families, they have parents who are still there, who can take care of them. But not only that, if they stay in their own country they may find *new* husbands, they have some prospects. But she knows that if the girls go with her, then *they* will be strangers in a strange land - in their own culture, amongst their own race, they'll have no trouble, perhaps, building another family - but Naomi knows the reality. It's like, "Listen, you've already got some stigmas - landless, penniless, women, widow - why add foreigner to the list."

In fact there are a couple of very chilling places in chapter two – jumping ahead to when she *did* leave her home - where Ruth is warned that if she works in a field unaccompanied she might be physically and probably sexually assaulted. It was a hard world for unattached women - still is in many parts of our globe. You have to understand the history of the time, there was enormous racial animosity between Moab and Israel, and if these Moabite women come to Israel - racially marginalized people, members of a hated race - Naomi knows they would be the objects of violence, so she says, “Go back...”

And Orpah does, but Ruth...oh, Ruth makes this incredible statement that has become quite famous, **v.16-18**, “*But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.’ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.*”

Here’s what she’s saying, “I am binding myself to you in such a way that whatever happens to you, happens to me, right up to death. So help me God.” Listen, every act of immigration is drastic. An immigrant is somebody who leaves the familiar behind and plunges into the unknown. Right? Some of you are immigrants. A lot of you are the children of immigrants. Every act of immigration is drastic, but listen, the immigrants who

do that, who take that incredible risk, always do so in the hope of a *better* life. Here is someone who is willing to leave everything behind, take a great risk, *knowing* she’s going to have a *worse* life. This is one of the most amazing speeches in the whole Bible.

So here are our two heroines, they return to Israel and Ruth becomes the breadwinner and supports them - even though they’re in destitute poverty - by “gleaning” in the fields. This is a practice where the poor come along and collect leftovers in the fields after the harvest. But it was more than dumpster diving, the Bible actually commanded that land owners intentionally leave a little bit of their crop left over so the poor can have some. It’s a part of God’s concern with justice that we talked about last week.

And now we’re ready for the third part of the story, **The Goodness of Boaz**. So **Ruth 2:3** says, “*So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.*” Just happened to be that one. Just a coincidence that the field belonged to Boaz. And it just so happened that while she was there, Boaz stopped by to say “good job” to his workers. This Boaz is a good guy. I sometimes say Daniel is the only character in the OT I can think of who is presented with no flaws – I may have to add Boaz to that list. So Boaz strikes up a conversation with Ruth, and he is impressed when he learns the sacrifices she has made to come and support her mother-in-law.

So Ruth goes home and she's telling mom about her day, and Naomi says, "Hold on, did you say, Boaz? Oh my word! Praise God! Do you realize what has happened? You just "turned out" to be in the field of Boaz, who is one of the few people left alive who could be my kinsman-redeemer." And the rest of the story turns on that. Well, what's a kinsman-redeemer? It's the key theme of the last chapter.

In Israelite law, a kinsman-redeemer was someone who had the right to buy back the ancestral land of any family that had lost it. See, when Israel first came into the Promised Land, every family got land. Land is incredibly important in Jewish culture. This is part of what makes the Jewish-Palestinian tension so difficult. You can't just pick the Jews up and give them more land outside of Cleveland. The land matters – *that* land! So every family had a sort of ancestral, original set of land. And Naomi had lost her land, probably her husband sold it during the famine that sent them to Moab.

But when they lost their land, a kinsman-redeemer was someone who, if that person was willing to be generous with his own money, had the right to buy that ancestral land back for the family, and the person who owned it *had* to sell it, whether they wanted to or not. It was intended to prevent a short-term loss from wiping out your long-term existence.

The problem in this situation is anybody who would be Naomi's kinsman-redeemer, in order to get the land back and to reestablish the family and to reestablish the family line wouldn't just have to buy back the land - which would be generous enough - he'd have to marry Ruth. That was how the system worked. So he'd have to marry the wife of Naomi's son - in this case a woman of a despised race. It would be the only way to reestablish the line.

And long-story-short – actually it's not that long, so short-story-shorter – Ruth gets to know Boaz some more and one night, in an enormously bold act, she goes to Boaz in the middle of the night, sits at his feet – creeper! – and when he wakes up, *she* proposes marriage. He's startled - "Who's there?" she says, "It's me Ruth, I want you to be a kinsman-redeemer of Naomi and myself. I want you to marry me." And he *does*. It's the chic-flic of the Bible!

So Naomi and Ruth are saved. Ruth has a son by Boaz and the family line is restored. They go from social nobodies to the ultimate somebody – a *divine* somebody. Because the Ruth story ends the way the Matthew story *begins*, with a genealogy. They have been spliced into the line of the Messiah. Boaz is the Great Grandson (times 7) of Judah and Tamar who we saw last week. And this son of Boaz and Ruth will be the grandfather of a boy named David who will slay a giant and grow up to be the greatest king of Israel. And we'll actually look at his story next week.

So that's the story of Naomi and Ruth and Boaz. Isn't that a nice story? Yes, but it's more than nice, there are three very important things we can learn practically, and they also point us to what Christmas is about. So let's look at this. **First of all, this tells us about the absolute life-changing power of friendship.** I have to tell you friendship is the most powerful thing on earth. As great as marriage is, the essence of what makes marriage unbelievably good, the essence of what makes sex in marriage unbelievably good, is friendship. Friendship is the bedrock of relationship. Friendship is the foundation of *spiritual* relationship.

I want you to see something, notice how Ruth is converted. And she *is* converted. At the beginning of the story she is the pagan worshiper of multiple Moabite gods and in the end she is a worshiper of Yahweh. And you may think that is politically incorrect - I understand, that's what society tells you – but society is wrong. I'll tell you why in a minute, but look at Ruth's conversion for a second.

See, Naomi tries to send her back to her gods. That's what she says in the first chapter, "Go back to your people and your gods." What does Ruth say? "I don't want my gods anymore. I want your God." In fact she doesn't just use the word "god", notice she says, "Your God will be my God," but look.

She says, **v.17**. "*May **the LORD** deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.*" When she says "**LORD**", that's the Hebrew word Yahweh. That is the covenant name. She is taking the covenant name on herself. That is nothing short of a conversion we're looking at.

And when she says that, Naomi realizes it's no use arguing with her anymore, "Well, if you're going to worship Yahweh, well, yeah, come on let's go to Israel." So did Naomi proselytize? That's the dirty word in our sophisticated culture isn't it? Believe what you believe, but don't try to convince anyone else to believe what you believe – which is totally contrary to human nature by the way; "Oh my God, you've got to try this donut!"

But let's look pretty carefully at something. There's an interesting balance here. On the one hand, Naomi is not what we call a "pluralist" in her religion – all religions are basically the same. Oh no. What do I mean by that? Look carefully at **verses 8 and 9**, "*Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May **the LORD** show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May **the LORD** grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.*"

She's sending them back to their Moabite families and to their Moabite gods, but notice she doesn't say, "May *your* gods bless you." She doesn't say, "I hope you'll find satisfaction in your religion like I find satisfaction in mine. Yahweh blesses me, and Chemosh will bless you, and that's great, because everyone's religion is equally satisfying for them, and they're all equally valid." She doesn't do that.

She says, "If you're going to live a blessed life, *the Lord* is going to have to bless you. My God. Yahweh, the one true God." That's what set Israel apart in the ancient world. They didn't have a bunch of regional or seasonal gods – for harvest or war or sex – they had one exclusive deity who said, "No. I'm the God of all cultures and all peoples and you must worship Me exclusively." Certainly, Naomi knew that, so Naomi is not a pluralist, but what "converts" Ruth?

What converts Ruth? Does Naomi bushwhack her? See that's one of the reasons why people don't like proselytizing. It's because a lot of religious people are just so mean and rude, and think they can argue people into faith or scare people into faith. What converts Ruth? Think about this, Naomi is trying to send them back. Why would she do that? She wouldn't be sending them back because she thinks their gods are fine. Oh no. We already see that.

Secondly, she *wants* them with her. She's lonely. She has absolutely nothing. She's absolutely destitute. She's absolutely empty. Of course she wants them with her – misery loves company. So why would she be sending them back? She would only be sending them back because she *loves* them.

At that moment, she's demonstrating this sacrificial love. She's putting *their* needs way ahead of her needs, even though they do not believe what she believes at all...and *that's* the moment in which Ruth says, "I want your God." Do you see what's happening? Let me put it to you in a nutshell. It's when Naomi loves Ruth - even though Ruth doesn't believe - that Ruth believes. It's when Naomi sacrificially loves somebody who doesn't believe in her God at all, that her God begins to look attractive.

Put it another way, Ruth says, "The reason I want to believe in a God with all these exclusive claims is because of the incredibly *nonexclusive* love He generates in your heart. I've never seen anybody love anybody like you love me. I know your God is the most exclusive God in His claims in the world, and yet, our religion doesn't produce this kind of nonexclusive love. Look at how you're loving me. Look at how you're willing to send me back. Look at how you're willing to put my needs way ahead of your needs, even though you desperately want me to be with you. Look at what kind of nonexclusive love your God creates in your heart. I want that God."

If you love people in deep friendship, regardless of what they believe, what you believe is going to look pretty appealing. If you love people only if they believe what you believe, or only if it looks like they're on their way to believing what you believe, why should they believe what you believe? Look, *everybody* thinks their view of spiritual reality is superior, that's why it's their view. If you say, "You shouldn't have an exclusive view of God", *that* is an exclusive view of God. Everybody has a view of God – even atheists – and everybody is basing their life and their eternity on that view of God. You think the world would be better off if more people believed like you do – you do! Everyone does.

And there's *nothing* wrong with that. Here's what's wrong - How do you treat people who differ from you? If you hate bigots, don't you feel superior to them? Then *you're* a bigot – you're intolerant of intolerance. On the other hand, if you're "deeply religious" and you only love people who love just like you, or who believe just like you, or who are moving in that direction – that's not radical loving, that's what *everybody* does. "I like people who like me."

The thing that facilitates encounter with God is *unconditional* love in a powerful friendship. That's what changes Ruth's life. Ruth makes this enormous commitment of courage and love to Naomi and God because she was just the *subject* of a enormous act of

sacrificial love and courage. Do you see that? What she's doing is not out of the blue. She was changed by a vision of Naomi's sacrificial, nonexclusive love - love to her even though she didn't believe - and that's what made her *want* to believe.

That is basically how just about everybody I know ever finds God. It's not through sermons; I mean, that's the ammo, that can take you over the line. But what gets the conversation started - almost every encounter with the divine *starts* with a powerful friendship in which you experience nonexclusive unconditional love.

By the way, if you want to know how you build a friendship, there are two components, and you can see it, actually, in Ruth's statement. The two things she says are if you want to have a good friendship, you have to make **time** - "*Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.*" - and you also have to have a **commitment** - "*'till death do us part*". See? If you give time to a relationship but not commitment through thick and thin *or* if you say, in principle, you're committed to a person but you don't spend time with them, you don't have a friendship. **Time plus commitment - plus unconditional love, nonexclusive love - will enable people to find God...** even a God who makes the most exclusive claims possible.

So we see the power of friendship, **secondly we see the incredible power of hope**. That's what the book of Ruth teaches us; You must never lose hope. No matter what's going on in your life, God is doing 10,000 things for His glory and for your good, even when He appears to be absent, even when He doesn't seem to be paying attention.

One of the things scholars note about the book of Ruth – compare it to virtually any other book of the Bible and it is unique in its *lack* of anything overtly supernatural. There are no miracles. There are no dreams. There are no visions. There are no words from God in her head. This is a book for people who look around their life and they see absolutely no dramatic answers to prayer, no dramatic events of any sort; they see nothing but mundane times and hard times. The book of Ruth is trying to say in the mundane and in the hard times, God is still at work. He's still there. He's still at work, even though you don't see it. You must learn to see the signs of hope that He's working, hidden under the surface.

When Naomi comes back, she says, "I'm empty." That's what she tells her old friends in Bethlehem, "*the LORD has brought me back empty*". But who's walking back with her? Ruth! This incredible treasure God has put into her life, this woman whose love and courage is incredible, who's going to change

her life and Boaz's life and bring them into the line of the Messiah. She has just walked back into the village with this incredible treasure, and what does she say to her friends? "I got nothing." Ruth's going, "I guess I'm nothing."

Do you know what the lesson here is? Because Naomi has an agenda for what *she* thinks God should be doing in her life, and because God's agenda is not her agenda, she can't see the signs of hope God has put in her life. She hasn't seen the *great* things God has put there. Some of you are in this very same place right now - absolutely in the same place. You have an agenda and things aren't going your way. And it seems like God isn't paying attention. And you feel hopeless. And yet...

Ruth just *happened* into the field of Boaz? It just *happened* that she found the one guy she had to marry in order for the Messiah to be born into the world? It just *happened*? Just a coincidence, huh? See, the whole idea is God loves to work **in the mundane**, where you can't see it. God loves to work in the hard times, where you can't see it. Did you know that's a key theme of Christmas? I mean, how many thrones are there in the world? Not that many. How many smelly, dirty mangers are there in the world? Lots. God comes through mangers, not through thrones.

See, the second message here is don't you look out on your life and say, "I don't see any answers to prayer. I don't know what God is doing. I got nothing. God has abandoned me. God has given up on me." That's what Naomi is saying, "God has abandoned me." But see, when Ruth was clinging to her, *God* was clinging to her. God was clinging to her and she didn't see it.

And God is clinging to you. If you believe in Him, God is clinging to you. God never lets you go. Do you see that? Do you understand that? Can you see the hope? It's really easy to miss it. I mean, by the first Christmas, the Jewish religious leaders had been looking for the arrival of the Messiah for *centuries*. It was a key theme of all their books of prophecies. But when the Messiah actually showed up, they *missed* it. "That's not the King of King, Lord of Lords, hope of the world...that's just some dirty bastard in a barn."

No, no, no, God is at work...in the mundane things, in the empty things, in the hard things. So don't lose hope. It's hard, I know. That's why we have church. See, we need each other to continue to encourage one another. Because sometimes I'm the blind one and I need to hold *your* hand. Nobody can hold onto that hope all the time. I mean, sometimes you go into a stage in which you intellectually know it, and you just don't have the hope in your heart. So sometimes you're the Naomi and you need a Ruth around you.

At some point in the future, maybe you can be the Ruth, and you'll have to give it to a Naomi, but the point is you can never handle these sorts of things without community.

You'll never live a life of hope in the midst of all kinds of troubles in your life without community, but even when God seems absent, He's working, He's there. We may be blind, but He never is. So, the power of friendship, the power of hope – and can you see how the two go together actually? – and then the **third** and final lesson, if you're doing it right, **the gospel of grace should destroy snobbery and prejudice.**

It should. There are a lot of people who say that the purpose of the Bible – the purpose of the preacher – is to call people back to "traditional moral values." Well, I'm all for moral values, but "*tradition*"...Let me suggest something to you. See, it's easy to read Ruth as a traditional tale; poor girl gets rich guy, has babies, everybody lives happily ever after. See, that's traditional society, just cast Sandra Bullock as Ruth and George Clooney as Boaz and you just made \$200 million dollars! I need to shop this screenplay at SXSW.

And yet...if you read more carefully, you'll see at almost every point, this story - this *history*, let's not forget - subverts traditional society. For example, traditional society says, what? First, traditional society says, "Blood is thicker than water. The important thing is family." Naomi tried to send Ruth back, "Go back to your family, the people you share blood with."

And Ruth says, "I don't want that. I want a relationship with somebody who has the same relationship with God that I do. I don't want blood but *grace*, to be the basis of our relationship." So Ruth and Naomi, on the basis of the grace of God, create a nontraditional family of two women, with Ruth the breadwinner. That's the family that actually saves Naomi's skin.

Secondly, traditional society says, "Interracial marriage is a no-no," but the salvation of the whole world comes to us through an interracial marriage. That's what the whole story is about. Just like the salvation of the whole world comes through children of incest - last week in Tamar – just like the salvation of the world comes through an adulterous affair – we'll see *that* story next week - now it comes through an interracial marriage. It's almost God's way of saying, "I don't care what the world standards are; My ways are higher than your ways."

And thirdly, traditional society says, "Men are better than women," – and if it doesn't say it, it certainly thinks it. And yet what's the most astounding thing, it's the climax of this book written 3,000 years ago – how in the world, out of any ancient culture, do you get this closing line? After the baby is born, the women of the village gather around Naomi and say, **(Ruth 4:15)**, "*He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and **who is better to you than seven sons**, has given him birth.*"

In the Bible, seven is the perfect number. Do you know what they're saying? "Glad you got a grandson, but Ruth is better to you than an infinite number of sons." Every society at that point said, "Sons are what you need. Sons are what you have to have." What's the moral of the story? The moral of the story is the world's standards are stupid. Be careful about standing up for "traditional" values, because many of them turn out to be wrong.

Through story after story in the Bible, God says, "I work through the second son, not the first son; through the unattractive woman, not the attractive woman; through the foreigner, not the citizen; through the poor, not the rich." How many times does He have to say it?

If you believe you are saved by works, by your performance, then you could look at somebody else, who didn't have your beliefs, and you'd say, "I'm a better person than they." But if you're saved by sheer grace - which is what the gospel says - not through what you have done, but by what *He* has done, by sheer grace, then you look at any other person and you realize they're just as likely to be a better person than you.

Why? Because your relationship with God is not based on you being better. That should be the death of snobbishness, that should be the death of prejudice. I mean, over and over and over and over and over again, this book is trying to say that. So there are your three lessons. Do you want to be like Ruth...practice the transforming power of friendship, see the signs of hope even in the hardest and most mundane life and end the snobbishness, end the prejudice? There it is. Let's pray...

No, I'm just kidding. We're not done, we *can't* be done! You can't end a sermon like that, because if you end a sermon like that, you might feel okay for a minute, but by the time you're halfway home it's going to dawn on you, "Wait, that's really hard. I can't do that." You're right; you can't. Why is Ruth in the genealogy?

Ruth is in the genealogy of Jesus. What does that mean? This is *not* just a wonderful story saying, "Be like Ruth." Ruth points us to the One who comes *out* of her, the One who is her descendant. Don't you realize, when Ruth looked at Naomi, she said to herself, "If I keep my life, Naomi loses hers, so I'm going to give my life away so Naomi can have a life. I will take her poverty on myself. I will take her marginality on myself. I will become poor so that through my poverty, she might become rich" – do you see that's what she did?

That's what happened. Ruth left her father's house. Ruth left her own country. She came down. She became an outsider. She became a suffering servant. She became someone who was rejected. She became someone who was despised. Does she remind you of anybody? Let me tell you what really made Ruth as great as that. What made Ruth so great?

Did Ruth become great because she said, "I've always wanted to be a sacrificial person, a loving person, an unprejudiced person, a person who has hope. I've always wanted to do that, so now that's my New Year's resolution. I'm going to be a person of hope"? No. She saw an act of sacrificial love she couldn't account for. When she saw Naomi willing to throw her life away - what little she had left - for her, that changed her.

But if the sight of Naomi's sacrificial love made Ruth, Ruth...how much more should it make you like Ruth to see the One to whom Ruth points, what he did? Jesus left his Father's throne above, emptied himself, died for us, left the ultimate riches to take on the ultimate poverty – walked away from heaven to wind up in hell. For you. When you see that and that thrills you and that fills you up and that changes you, it's not just an intellectual idea but it's something that just fills your heart, *then* you can start living like Ruth...and not until then.

You see, this is what Christmas is all about really. The incarnation shows God wants **friendship** with us. He's not just saying, "Obey me." Remember what we said friendship is? God says, "I'm coming close. I'm coming to earth so I can spend time with you. I'm going to die on the cross so I can demonstrate the extent of my commitment to you. I want your friendship." Christmas shows God's friendship. Christmas shows all the things we've been talking about. You'll never be like Ruth until you become like the One to whom Ruth points...so look at him. Look at Jesus and all he has done for you and be transformed by his great love.

Now...let's pray....