

## **Pause: Learning To Wait on God Naomi & Ruth**

Good morning, Colonies family! As you know, today is Mother's day. Every year on this day I share a brief reading acknowledging both the joy and pain of this day. Today, I share these words in a different setting, but they are still true.

To those who gave birth this year to their first child—we celebrate with you  
To those who lost a child this year – we mourn with you  
To those who are in the trenches with little ones every day and wear the badge of food stains – we appreciate you  
To those who experienced loss through miscarriage, failed adoptions, or running away—we mourn with you  
To those who walk the hard path of infertility, fraught with pokes, prods, tears, and disappointment – we walk with you. Forgive us when we say foolish things. We don't mean to make this harder than it is.  
To those who are foster moms, mentor moms, and spiritual moms – we need you  
To those who have warm and close relationships with your children – we celebrate with you  
To those who have disappointment, heart ache, and distance with your children – we sit with you  
To those who lost their mothers this year – we grieve with you  
To those who experienced abuse at the hands of your own mother – we acknowledge your experience  
To those who lived through driving tests, medical tests, and the overall testing of motherhood – we are better for having you in our midst  
To those who are single and long to be married and mothering your own children – we mourn that life has not turned out the way you longed for it to be  
To those who step-parent – we walk with you on these complex paths  
To those who envisioned lavishing love on grandchildren -yet that dream is not to be, we grieve with you  
To those who will have emptier nests in the upcoming year – we grieve and rejoice with you  
To those who placed children up for adoption – we commend you for your selflessness and remember how you hold that child in your heart  
And to those who are pregnant with new life, both expected and surprising –we anticipate with you  
This Mother's Day, we walk with you. Mothering is not for the faint of heart and we have real warriors in our midst.

Today our study brings us to the feet of two of these warriors from the Old Testament book of Ruth. In the Jewish Scriptures the book of Ruth follows Proverbs 31, the description of a virtuous woman, as if to suggest this story is the chapter embodied. The book is read around this time of year during the harvest celebration known as Festival of Weeks or Pentecost.

The story does not begin with harvest or celebration. A famine has forced Elimilech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons to move away from Bethlehem for their survival. It is noteworthy in the story that Bethlehem means house of bread. Their journey brings them to Moab.

While there, wave after wave of tragedy pummels Naomi. First, her husband dies. Without extended family, Naomi becomes dependent on her two sons.

*They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:3–5, NIV)*

Mahlon and Killion were married for ten years, that is two hundred and forty disappointments for Naomi as she waits to become a grandmother. And now still dealing with grief from the loss of her husband Naomi buries her two sons. She watches her daughters-in-law become widows.

About this time Naomi hears rumors of fortunes turning in her homeland. She packs up and sets out towards Bethlehem. On the road, the text does not provide information about how far into the journey, Naomi sends her daughters-in-law back to their fathers house in Moab.

*“...Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband...No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has turned against me!” (Ruth 1:11–13, NIV)*

The Hebrew term for widow *Almanah* is connected to the word for unable to speak. Widows in that culture, not unlike this one, were voiceless. Orpah and Ruth are young enough to have other options in their own country. The only hope Naomi has is for her suffering to come to an end. You hear her wrestle with questions like, “Has my usefulness expired?” and “Is God good for me...for women?” Her life has stalled. Someone has pushed the pause button.

You may know the end of the story. You may know that she becomes the great-grandmother of David, the king of Israel. But don’t rush there. My friend, Mike Cope, recently remembering an ad in the Christian Chronicle from years ago announcing the release of a new CD from Harding's A Cappella Choir. The name of the recording was "Teach Me Lord to Wait." The ad had a box you could check that said: "Please rush me my copy of 'Teach Me Lord to Wait.'"

Don’t rush to the end of this story, because Naomi cannot. She is the Bible’s female version of Job, someone who has lost everything and begins to question God. And like in Job, God does not provide any explanation. For now the three women embrace and weep. The text tells us Ruth “clung to her” saying,

*“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.” (Ruth 1:16–17, NIV)*

These words have been read at weddings for decades symbolizing a bride’s commitment to her husband. Just once I would like the words to be used in context as the young bride turns away from the groom and to her mother-in-law to announce “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.”

These are not words of romance, but of a conversion. Naomi has laid out the evidence against God’s goodness and Ruth makes a decision to follow Yahweh. This is the hinge moment of the story as an *Almanah*, a voiceless woman, **embracing her purpose as an image bearer of God Almighty.**

Naomi reluctantly allows Ruth to join her back in Bethlehem. Their poverty still presents a problem. Ruth risks working in the fields to provide. I say risk because this is “In the days when the judges ruled,” (Ruth 1:1, NIV). Moral decay is on display all throughout

the judges. The final couple chapters of Judges detail the vulnerability of women, particularly foreign women could face during this time.

It just so happened that she went to work in the field of a “man of standing,” who also happened to be a relative. Old Testament law required farmers to leave the outer edges of a field for the poor. But the farmer was left to wrestle with the tension of how much was the outer edges.

Boaz, this “man of standing,” does much more than leave the outer edge. He protects the voiceless and vulnerable. He allows Ruth to eat lunch with his hired hands, and sends her home with 30 pounds of grain. When Naomi sees the leftovers from lunch and the incredible amount of grain she exclaims,

*“The Lord bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” She added, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers.” (Ruth 2:20, NIV)*

Naomi’s eyes have been opened to the goodness of God.

I once heard the story of a Bible translator who, when stumped by how best to translate the word “lamb” for a people who had never seen a lamb, decided to substitute the word “llama.” In a way, the choice made sense, but a llama isn’t anything like the silent, defenseless little lamb, and misses the point completely.

Translators face a similar dilemma when they come across the Hebrew word *hesed* in the *Old Testament*. No word captures the exact meaning. Consequently, we end up with a mix of words like “kindness,” “mercy,” “loyalty,” “loving-kindness.

Carolyn Custis James writes, “*Hesed* is a strong Hebrew word that sums up the ideal lifestyle for God’s people. It’s the way God intended for human beings to live together from the beginning...It’s actually the kind of love we find most fully expressed in Jesus. In a nutshell, *hesed* is the gospel lived out.”

In this short book where God is barely mentioned, we see the **deliverance of God often comes through the people of God**. We look for the waters to part, to be led by a fiery cloud, to see a man walk on water or raise the dead. Disappointment hits when life is filled with ordinary moments.

On January 17, 1987, nine year old John O’Leary suffered third degree burns on 87% of his body in a tragic accident caused by playing with fire and gasoline. Injured on Saturday, on Sunday Jack Buck, the voice of the St. Louis Cardinals walked into the room and said, “Kid, wake up. You are going to live. You are going to survive. Keep fighting.” Buck returned every day the young boy could go home.

O’Leary spent five months in the hospital, endured dozens of surgeries, lost all of his fingers to amputation, and had to relearn how to walk, write and feed himself. Before

O'leary learned to write, Buck sent a baseball autographed by Cardinal shortstop, Ozzie Smith, and said all he had to do to get another ball was send a thank you note to Smith. After he struggled to scribble the note another baseball with a similar note was included.

Buck ended up sending 60 baseballs that year leading O'Leary to say, "It changed my world, changed me from the inside out."

O'Leary's story is remarkable not because of the names attached, but because of the difference made in a life just by showing up. Day in and day out.

This is the Gospel of Ruth—a beacon of light across the empty blackness of a broken life. Ruth and Boaz, perhaps unknowingly, are engaging in kingdom work. **The kingdom advances not just through stories that make headlines, but also through the *hesed* daily acts:** cooking food for your family, running your business in such a way that cares for outsiders, sleepless nights caring for a sick child.

Often, God answers our prayers in the simple touch of a human embrace. As we wait, show the love of God. Stuck at home we are overwhelmed with finger pointing and arguments. You cannot find your purpose correcting the worlds opinions with pithy memes or long FaceBook diatribes. You find your purpose as a conduit of God's *hesed*, His everlasting love. Even while you wait.

Share his love.