

Living on Empty

An Essay on Ruth 1:19–22 | BY ANDREA TRUSTY KING

Our story took place before Israel had kings, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. “It’s your thing, do what you want to do,” was the order of the day. But if you do what you want to do instead of what you are supposed to do, there are going to be some consequences.

And consequences there were. The Bible tells us that God sent a famine to the land. It was hard; it was rough; but it was deserved.

Elimelech, though, decided he would pad his punishment. Since God had sent a famine to Israel, he would move to Moab. Elimelech sold his inheritance in Bethlehem and gave up his piece of the Promised Land to go to Moab.

If you are a Bible student, you know that Moab was a wicked place. God did not want Israel to have any dealings with Moab. The Israelites were not to marry its women or have children with them.

God was clear about this, but Elimelech thought he could get around God. He figured he could outrun the punishment of God. He wanted to ignore what God had said because he did not like it.

Elimelech took his family to Moab, and the Bible says that he died there. Naomi, his wife, was left as a single mother to raise two boys. When the boys came of age, they married Moabite women, but they were infertile. The boys could not produce after ten years of marriage and they died there. So here we have these three widows, all alone.

What were they to do all by themselves? The Bible says they lifted up their voices and wept.

Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, heard that God had visited his people by giving them bread, so the Bible says the women began the journey back to Bethlehem, which literally meant “house of bread.” “Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah” (Ruth 1:7a NKJV).

Naomi must be commended for going out from the place where she was. She did not belong in Moab. She did not belong outside her place of inheritance. She did not belong outside the will of God. She had tried living in Moab and had found it did not live up to its reputation.

She decided to go where she was supposed to be. She made a beeline for Judah. She did not know what awaited her there, but whatever it was she knew that the safest place in the whole wide world was in the perfect will of God.

Naomi said “Let me get up from here. I am tired of living in Moab. I need to be with the people of God.” So she left the place where she was and began the journey to where she was supposed to be.

That is what some of us need to do. We need to go from where we are. We know that things are not right. We have emptiness inside and we know that only God can fill it, but in order for him to do it, we need to put ourselves in a position to be filled. We have got to move from the place where we are.

That could be a place of depression. It could be a place of grief, of bitterness, of uncertainty

Naomi
understood
that God
had to
empty her
in order
to fill
her up

concerning why God allowed certain things to happen. In those times, it is so easy to isolate yourself from the people of God. And in some cases, you have isolated yourself from the full blessings of God. "Therefore, she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah" (Ruth 1:7 NKJV).

Judah means "the praise of the Lord." Thus, the Bible says she went from the place where she was and she got on the road to return to the land of praise. She was not there, but she finally figured out that if she was going to get there, if she was going to survive, she had to get on the path to praise.

When people come to me depressed because Moab has beaten them up, I make them find some reason to praise the Lord. Why? Because when you hurt, you are absorbed in yourself. You focus on your pain and what you are going through. Pain blinds you to the nice things, the blessings that continue to come your way.

You are stuck on the pain, stuck on the rain, so you do not see the sun peeping through the clouds. You focus on what is being done to you so much that you do not acknowledge and appreciate what is done for you. The quickest way to get from the place you are to where you want to be is to get on the path to praise.

Three times Naomi tries to get Orpah and Ruth to go back home to Moab. Twice they vow to stay, but the third time Orpah goes back home, and Ruth declares that she will stay with her. She had decided nothing anyone could say would turn her around. "Your God is going to be My God. Your People are my People." She wailed that nothing but death could keep her from Naomi.

The Bible says that they journeyed on and finally made it to Bethlehem. When they arrived, the town was abuzz. "Naomi is home. Naomi is home." Naomi could bear to hear it no longer. She demanded that they stop. Naomi means "lovely and pleasant," but for her life turned out to be far different. Her name mocked her. It glazed over all she had been through. It minimized her situation.

"Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, not pleasant, but bitter. I am not the same woman who left here because God made me bitter. I might have been pleasant when I left, because I was full, but God has brought me back empty."

Ruth is often lauded for her loyalty, Naomi should be commended for her honesty. She was telling it like it was. She was a lot older than when she had left. In her younger days, she had been pleasant, keeping in her real feelings. But now she was old enough to have her say. Naomi was back around church folk, but she did not feel real churchy about how God had handled her. She was still on the path to praise.

Yeah, the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, and I am mad about it. I am not at the point where I can smile through the tears. I am not where I see the silver lining in the cloud. Some stuff went down that I do not understand—and I do not like—and I hold God responsible. I am not trying to be pleasant; I am not trying to be lovely. I do not have the patience or the fakeness to try to make you like me. What you see is what you get. If you want to know how I am doing, no I am not fine, I am mad, and I am bitter because I am empty.

This story is one that displays the sovereignty of God. Naomi argued with God because he was supposed to be in control. This thought that God is God and that he does what he wants, when he wants, how he wants is something to shout about as long as he wants to bless us. It is something to dance about as long as he is opening up the windows of heaven and pouring out blessings. It is good news as long as no weapons prosper against us and God takes care of all our enemies.

It gets problematic, though, when he allows other things to happen; when he does not run his plans by us to see if we like them; when he goes on acting by himself without our approval. Then we have a problem with God's goodness. We wonder what kind of God this is. We want to see his credentials.

But Job said, "Shall we accept only good from God, and not accept the bad?" Sometimes God uses adversity to get our attention. Sometimes he uses it to get the glory. And sometimes pain is the vessel through which God pours out a blessing. Yes, God had emptied Naomi but he did not leave her without hope. God had brought her back to a place where she could be filled.

Although it seemed invisible to Naomi, those of us on the outside clearly see that God's blessings never stopped coming her way. I am willing to bet that God has never stopped coming your way, either. In the midst of darkness, God always sends light. In the midst of

despair, there is always a ray of hope. Even when you are empty, God invites you to come and be filled. And that is what he did for Naomi, and what he will do for you.

God sent Naomi various rays of hope. The first ray of hope was Ruth. He sent Naomi somebody who would show her the joy of friendship. Ruth was loyal to her and obedient to her; Ruth had declared that her life would be spent caring for and comforting Naomi.

The next ray of hope followed soon after. "So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest" (Ruth 1:22 NKJV). The first ray of hope was Ruth, the second the reaping. It showed her the joy of favor.

The harvest was a time of joy and rejoicing because it was a time to gather. It signaled a beginning of reaping. If there was a time of harvest, that meant the time of famine was over. It meant that those who hungered—those who were empty—would soon be filled. Even nature hinted to her that even though she might be empty now, that was a temporary situation because it was harvest time.

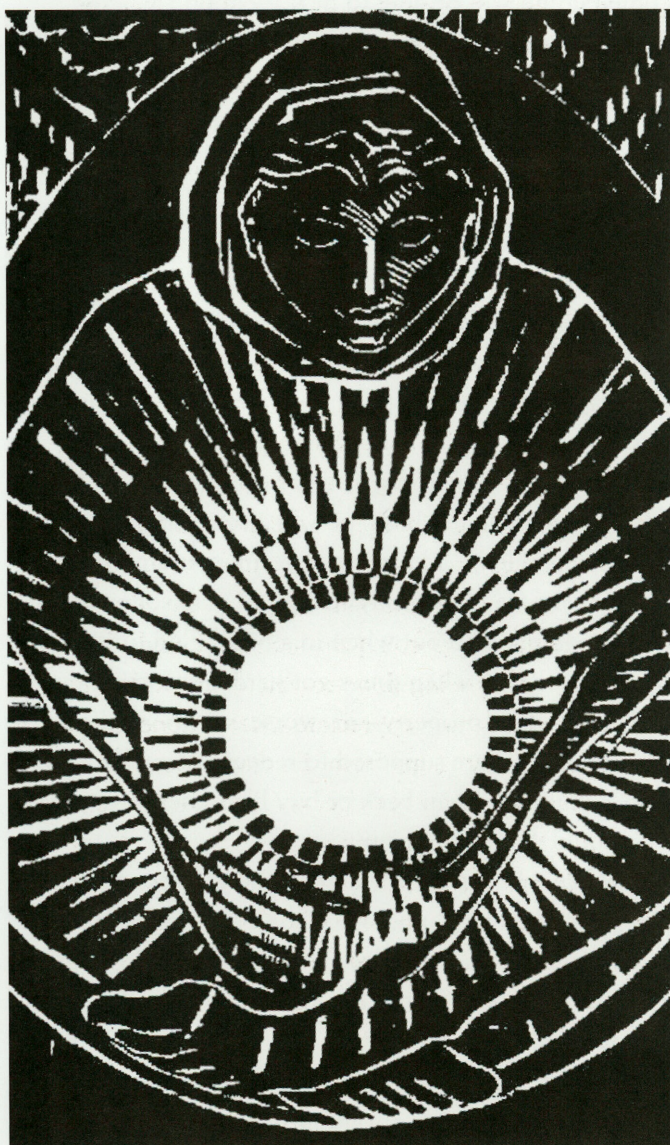
The only catch about harvest is that you reap what you have sown. Naomi had not sown any seed to reap, which is why she needed favor. God was about to bless her so she could reap where she had not sown.

Harvest did not mean that things had begun to bloom. It meant that they had been planted and had grown, and that all you had to do was to pluck. So this time of reaping hinted of hope. It actually screamed hope, because that meant God took the time to plant a field of blessing while Naomi was still in Moab, so that by the time she made it back to where she was supposed to be, her blessing would be ripe for the picking. The ray of reaping allowed Naomi to experience the joy of favor.

But the hope keeps coming. "There was a relative of Naomi's husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech. His name was Boaz" (Ruth 2:1 NKJV). Naomi was a poor widow in a bind, and now the Word reveals that she had a rich relative. Things begin to look up because she knew somebody; she had some kind of connection; she had a friend in high places.

But even higher than the upper echelons of society, Naomi had a God in her corner who was working in her

behalf. Whether or not she chose to acknowledge it, God was hooking Naomi up. He was granting her favor, lining things up for her. If she would just hold on, if she would just keep living, she would see that her end would be better than her beginning. God had not forgotten about her or forsaken her. As a matter of fact, he finally had her right where he wanted her.



Naomi sent Ruth out to get some food. The law of God said that when you harvested you were not supposed to glean the field. To glean means to go back and get what you left, or to be so detailed in your picking that you get everything off the vine. You were supposed to leave behind something for the poor, the widows, and the orphans.

Ruth went out and randomly picked Boaz's field to glean in. When Boaz saw her out there, he told the har-

vesters to drop grain on purpose. Ruth would glean all day, and day after day she brought the grain home to Naomi so that she would be full. Boaz was a noble and compassionate man. He was the man through whom God sought to bless those two widows.

Can God trust you to bless others? Can he count on you to leave blessings in your path so that those who come behind will be able to pick them up?

I recently heard Kamala Harris, the first (and only) female African-American U.S. district attorney, recount the wisdom her mother had shared with her. She said, "You might be the first to do a lot of things, but just make sure you are not the last."

We need to make it a habit to pave the way for those who will follow. We need to make it a habit to help those who can not help themselves, a habit to help those who cannot pay us back, because when you do, God says, if they cannot pay you, then I'll pay you. And I don't mind being on God's payroll.

There was something else special about Boaz. Not only was he rich and kind, he was also a *goel*. That meant he could be a kinsman-redeemer, another ray of hope. A *goel* was somebody related to you, someone who could bail you out when in a bind. God orchestrated a plan so that when times got hard and somebody had to sell their property—or, worse, sell themselves—their relatives were supposed to redeem them. The relatives would buy them back or buy back their property so it could stay in the family.

When a man died without any sons, these same *goels* could take his wife and have a son to allow his name to continue. Boaz was related, so he qualified for this responsibility—but he did not have to take it. If he did, he had to raise another family. He would have to use his money, time, and effort to build up another man's house. That took a lot, and few wanted such a responsibility. But Naomi needed this. She needed somebody to keep her husband's name going, and she needed somebody to buy back the property that her husband had sold when they had left for Moab.

Naomi decided to take a chance with Boaz. She concocted a plan to hook him up with Ruth. She got word that Boaz was down at the threshing floor, so she told Ruth to wash and anoint herself, and to put on some good clothes. Scholars say that Ruth was still wearing her mourning clothes. But Naomi was begin-

ning to understand that, although she had experienced some tough times, trouble doesn't always last. The great God Jehovah is in the hope-giving business.

God had indeed been blessing them, but they continued clothed in mourning clothes. Every day they awakened they wrapped themselves in their troubles. They kept their funeral clothes on as a testament to the world of what they had been through, but Naomi was beginning to understand what Isaiah meant when he said God wants to give us the garment of praise for our spirit of heaviness. It was time for them to stop reflecting the heartache they had been through and to reflect the hope that now lit their path. Naomi was getting farther along on her path to praise.

Naomi was beginning to realize that they had mourned long enough. It was time to move on. This did not mean she did not love, miss, or cherish the memory of her husband and her sons, but if she did not get herself together and act quickly, she would have only memories because no one would carry on her husband's line.

Naomi said, "Take off your mourning clothes and put on your good clothes and go down to where Boaz is. Wait until after he is finished eating and drinking. When he lies down to go to sleep, quietly uncover his feet and lay at them." This was a risky venture, because through this gesture she was proposing marriage to him. It was yet to be seen how he would react, but Ruth did as she was told.

Boaz noticed Ruth lying at his feet around midnight. "Who are you?" he asked.

"It is I Ruth. Take me under your wing for you are our *goel*, our kinsmen-redeemer," she requested.

Boaz was flattered and felt blessed by the invitation. There was a closer relative who should have the opportunity first, but if the other did not take it Boaz promised that he would. Before Ruth went home, Boaz gave her six *ephabs* of barley because he did not want Ruth to go home to Naomi empty-handed. God continued to fill Naomi with blessings.

Boaz worked it out and he and Ruth were married. The Lord opened up Ruth's womb and she bore a son, and they called his name Obed. Then those same women praised God. "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a *goel*, a kinsman-redeemer. May he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law,

who loves you, is better to you than seven sons, and she has borne him."

"Naomi has a son," they cried. And this time Naomi did not have any objections to their song because she had been on the way of praise long enough to know that God was good, that her life was in his hands, and that he cared for her. She learned that if she just kept living, her bad days would eventually give way to good days. Her storms would give way to sunshine, and her winters would give way to spring.

Naomi and Boaz now had a son, and they called his name Obed. Do you know what Obed means? It means worshiper.

That's exciting because you just figured out—just as Naomi did—that the reason you are going through bad times is because God is trying to birth a worshiper in you. God has got an Obed in you, trying to come out. God stopped up your womb before because the situation was not right, the setting was not right, Ruth was not ready for her Obed. She had some living to do, some growing to do, some climbing to do, some hoping to do.

She had to get out of Moab, and get on that path to praise. She had to come to the point where she declared to Naomi, "Your God, the God of heaven, the one that I have seen blessing you all this time, even though you complain about him, I know that he is with you, and he is the God I want to serve for the rest of my life."

Little did she know that by getting on the path to praise, God would fertilize that seed of worship within her. No it was not easy, it was not always fun; it hurts to be empty, but now Naomi understood that God had to empty her in order to fill her up. And fill her up, he did.

*She was empty, but now she's filled
She was broken but now she's healed
She was bitter but now she's better
She was bound but God loosed the fetter
She used to have sorrow but now she can shout
She was lost in Moab but God brought her out!*

Andrea Trusty King was recently ordained/commissioned with her husband, Kurt King, in the Southeastern California Conference. Together, they copastor the San Diego, California, Maranatha Church.

Have You Heard— and would you like to?

Recent and near-future events at

San Diego Adventist Forum

(Available on audiocassettes—usually two cassettes per session)

- Dr. Hans Diehl July/06
Diet and Lifestyle: What Shall We Eat?
- Dr. Fred Hoyt August/06
Ellen White and Plagiarism: Another View through the Eyes of an Historian
- Brian Bull w/Ted Ramirez September/06
Enron and Its Aftermath: What is the Likelihood of Fraud and Embezzlement at the GC and Its Major Institutions
- Dr. Linda Caviness October/06
Neuroscience and Intelligent Design: Fractal-like Implications for the Study of the Brain and Education
- David Dennis November/06
The Theology of Tithing
- Ivan Blazen January/07
Submission, Silence, and Baby-making: Tough Texts on Women

Mark your choices and send with check for \$8.50 (US), \$9.50 (foreign), per selection, to: San Diego Adventist Forum • P. O. Box 3148, La Mesa, CA 91944-3148

Retreat #10, is coming May 4-6, 2007 Pine Springs Ranch

(WATCH NEWSLETTER ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR DETAILS)

For further information, phone or e-mail

To be included on the newsletter announcement mailing roster without charge and/or to receive a listing of all audiocassettes available, please send a postcard with your name and address to the address above or e-mail to address below. If you have questions or need an answer fast, contact us at:

ak-jk@cox.net or phone (619) 561-2360

The Peacemaking Remnant

Essays and
Historical Documents

Edited by Douglas Morgan

**"A revolutionary work in that
it broadens the concept
of remnant."**

-- *Ministry* magazine

Contact Adventist Peace Fellowship for a copy
(\$10 donation suggested) or order at Amazon.com

An Adventist Peace Fellowship Publication

Historical documents

- 1860s GC Resolutions
- Joseph Bates
- Ellen White
- A.T. Jones & others

Essays by

- Charles Bradford
- Charles Scriven
- Kendra Haloviak
- Zdravko Plantak & others on why remnant and peacemaking belong *together*

info@adventistpeace.org

www.adventistpeace.org



Adventist Peace Fellowship

P.O. Box 2840 Silver Spring, MD 20915