

**Going Where the Grass is greener
Ruth 1:1-22**

Friends, the closest thing that I've come to experiencing famine was in high school when I participated in an event sponsored by World Vision called the 30hr famine – perhaps you've heard of it.

You go without food for 30hrs to experience a little bit of what its like for many people in this world who go without food on a daily basis. It was tough.

And I also know what its like to look for work, to try and find a job which will pay the bills and provide for you and your family.

It's not always easy, and sometimes you have to make sacrifices or put up with less than ideal living arrangements.

When Amoriza and I were first married, we had moved to St. Catherines, ON because I was going to take on a ministry position with Young Life as an Area Director.

However, long story short, I backed out of that ministry position because I didn't see that it would how I would be able to raise financial support for it.

So for the next couple years I commuted 45 minutes from St. Catharines over to Burlington where I worked in a factory... on the night shift, working with sheet metal, making toilet partitions and lockers - in a press shop.

It was not a high point in my work life.

And anyone who has experienced living with less than what they need, or having to juggle a crazy schedule just to try and make ends meet knows this can be a very difficult and trying time.

And anyone who has been in that situation has thought at least once - there must be an easier way to do this...

Maybe some of you know what that's like as well?

And there's a phrase we use to describe when someone is looking for better opportunities and a better life – we say *“they are looking for greener pastures”*

So if you've ever experienced this, then you can relate to the circumstances which prompted Naomi and her family to move from Bethlehem over to Moab – they were looking for greener pastures – quite literally.

And often when people are looking for greener pastures it's not simply just a matter of moving on to bigger or better opportunities, like graduating high school and going on to study at university...

No, when you are “looking for greener pastures” it's because there is an underlying element of being disillusioned with your current circumstances. You're disillusioned because they promised much and delivered little.

Have you ever been disillusioned with something that you thought would deliver more than what it did?

Certainly Naomi and her family were. They were born in Promised Land, the land of great expectations which the Israelites had finally come to - after wandering in the desert for forty years.

A land where they could settle down and farm build towns and cities and prosper. And at first that is what happened.

The name Naomi means *“pleasant”* - life was good.

And she marries a man named Elimelech – which means *“My God is King”* - and friends... when life is pleasant, when life is good; it's easy to believe that our God is in control, that He is King.

But after a while the promised land didn't live up to its promises anymore – the nation of Moab on the eastern border invaded and subjugated the Israelites and made them pay tribute, and then there was a famine to top it all off.

Adding insult to injury.

Life was no longer good, and who could believe that God was the King when your enemies had conquered you!

So Naomi and Elimelech start to become disillusioned, and when they are blessed with sons – they do not give them Israelite names, but old Cananite names instead, Mahon and Killion which mean – “weak” and “wasting away”.

Mahon and Killion are children of suffering and sorrow born into a world of want.

They are not brought up to believe in the promises that there was a God who had made a covenant with them, who promised He would take care of them, provide for them, who would call them His own.

They grew up in a time when a foreign power oppressed them and the promised land did not produce for them – there was no evidence to see that God was their covenant God who protected and provided for them.

And eventually the family’s disillusionment peaks - and when the opportunity presents itself to move on to greener pastures – they leave behind the Promised Land...

They leave the town of Bethlehem, whose name ironically means “*the house of food*”

They leave it all behind... and go to the land of Moab, to find food, and a future...and perhaps a new god?

You know friends; many people have given up on God because of the hard times they go through, because of their experience with the church or with other Christians, or because of the horrific suffering and evil they see operating in this world.

Maybe you can relate? Maybe you’ve gone down this path?

You’re disillusioned with God and his promises, with how He runs the world, with what He’s allowed to happen to you and your family.

Where was God when...? Why did God allow...? How come God didn't answer my prayer!?

Well if that's the kind of God He is then forget him...! I don't need this... I don't believe in Him and I'm moving on to greener pastures elsewhere!

In the aftermath of some significant disappointment or disaster in life where God did not come through as expected, we often look for something else; something that appears to hold more promises for you than what God has failed to come through with.

Maybe we see the answers to life's problems in becoming educated, in receiving therapy and in psychology, in being environmentally conscious, in volunteering and helping out to make a difference – in part maybe because in these areas we actually experience results fairly quickly.

Now - there isn't anything wrong with these things in and of themselves, but brothers and sisters what you need to know

and understand and be warned about... is that when you leave God's promises because you're disillusioned, and you pursue others things instead – something eventually dies.

Shortly after they settle in Moab Elimelech dies... and ten years later his sons meet death in "the greener pastures" which they thought would bring them life and give their family a future!

And now there is nothing left for Naomi – no husband, no sons, no land...

Brothers and sisters, that which we seek to find in greener pastures, in reaction to our disillusionment, will eventually kill off our faith.

What we thought would give us security, purpose, meaning, answers, doesn't offer the life which we are seeking from it.

What we thought we could do to make a difference... only makes us aware of how much more needs to be done – more than we could ever accomplish – so we despair.

What we thought could provide answers and meaning only ends up raising more questions, making us less certain about anything...

What we thought would give us security and safety can be undone in a short time of economic uncertainty.

What little faith we may have had left... dies, and there we have nothing left to continue on with.

But , brothers and sisters - the good news is that while we may have been disillusioned with God – He was never disillusioned with us.

We've done exactly what He expected us to do. He knows our hearts. He knows we are fickle and fair-weather friends when it comes to being faithful covenant partners with Him.

When life is good – we believe in Him, when things are bad – we doubt Him – from God's view we're very predictable.

Brothers and sisters - many times, that which causes us to become disillusioned with God are the things which He uses to test us.

This was certainly the case with Israel – in Judges 3:1,4 we read *“These are the nations the Lord left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan... They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands, which he had given their ancestors through Moses.”*

And lest you think this is capricious of God do this – brothers and sisters how else will we truly come to know and experience how fickle our hearts are?

How else will we be able to come to that point and decide that we truly love God for God, and not just because He makes our life good!

God wants to move us from loving Christ out of self-interest to loving Christ because of who He is!

And God also allows and works through these things to get our attention - so that we give up *our illusions* and come to a fuller understanding of the truth – of Jesus Christ.

You see Naomi’s generation of Israelites in the Promised Land failed their test and was experiencing oppression and famine because they had come to believe an illusion.

They believed that what we call the laws of nature, were in fact gods – gods that determined if there would be enough rain, enough sun, if you would have a good harvest, or if your flocks and herds would be healthy and increase, gods that could influence if you would have a fertile wife and many children.

Israel had come to believe that by worshiping and sacrificing to these gods they could ensure the promise of a good life and safe borders.

So God backed off to show them it wasn’t true – and these gods didn’t deliver.

So brothers and sisters, what is it that we really believe and trust in, what do we worship to ensure that we have a good life?

Because if it’s not Jesus Christ – then out of His love and concern for us and his determination to help us see our sinful nature for what it truly is - God will back off and allow hardship to show us that what we trust and believe in is an illusion, that on its own it doesn’t deliver.

And then, brothers and sister we are in a position to hear the good news about who God is, and to understand how we can live and work with the WORD in God’s creation.

So Naomi hears there is food once again in Bethlehem – the “house of food” is full once more. So Naomi returns back home, back to God, back to Bethlehem.

Brothers and sisters, the good news for us – is that in the city of Bethlehem God has provided more than just food.

He has given us a savior, one who can take away our disillusionment, forgive us for our fickle hearts and can transform us into faithful, loyal believers – one who can help us return to our God, and to his people.

God has given us His son Jesus Christ – the one who said...

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35)

“It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”(Matt 4:4)

So Brothers and sisters – there is bread, the bread of life that has come to Bethlehem. Hear the good news and believe it.

If you are like Naomi and God has tested you and you’ve become disillusioned – come back home.

Maybe you now know all too well how empty you are, how cynical and bitter you’ve become, that doesn’t matter – just come... Come back to God and His people because the time of testing is over and there is forgiveness and life in Christ.

Taste and see that God is good – He is the source of Blessings.

Or if you are like Ruth – who was never part of God’s people, was never tested for refinement – and had plenty to eat in Moab all her life – but in the end she could see that bread was not enough, it didn’t sustain her husband, or her in-laws.

If you are like Ruth you can see that something more was needed...

Something that Ruth believed she would find by going back with Naomi, by starting a relationship with Naomi’s God – so

that He would become her God, and she would belong to His people.

So if you are like Ruth then you will have seen, perhaps because we are in an economic downturn, that our jobs and our savings and our material belongings aren't all there is to life – as important and necessary as they are – something more is needed.

And like Ruth you have noticed that the something more needs to be more than the sentimental notions about still having your family and relationships around you.

Because as we've seen recently - when jobs and saving and material belongs disappear – relationships break down and are stressed and domestic violence and suicide rates escalate.

Something more is needed – something that can sustain us, satisfy us, fix marriages, heal cancer, mend a broken heart and give us meaning and purpose and carry us through these times of testing.

Something that I know you will find by coming here and hearing there is blessing in Jesus Christ, that He is the bread of life!

Something that you will receive by confessing that you need something more in life... and believing and trusting that that something more is Jesus.

Our Lord will become your Lord and you can learn, along with us, what it means to follow Him – and leave behind the illusions of your prior life and know the truth.

Brothers and sisters, Naomi and Ruth heard the good news – there is bread in Bethlehem and they went there.

Is the Holy Spirit prompting you to return back like Naomi? Is He showing you that you need something more like Ruth?

You will find it here - in the House of God, in the Body of Christ – the bread of life. Welcome back and welcome – Amen.