

**When Everything Changes:
Finding God in Life's Transitions**

Worth It

May 22/23, 2010

Good morning everyone.

That's a great song by Mute Math ... and it's also a pretty good description of how the two main characters in the biblical story we've been looking at in recent weeks may have felt.

If you've been here either week, I'm sure you remember how the first part of the story goes. When a famine struck their homeland of Israel, Naomi (one of the main characters) and her husband, Elimilech, decided to move 40 miles to the east, into the neighboring country of Moab. The plan was to find work and food and to provide for their family.

And, for a while, the plan worked. Their two young boys, Kilion and Mahlon, grew to be young men and married two young Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth.

But then, to quote the song ... *backfire*:

- Elimilech died, leaving Naomi a widow.
- Then Kilion and Mahlon died, leaving Orpah and Ruth, who were probably only in their mid-to-late 20s, as widows.
- Orpah decides to move back into her father's house.
- Naomi decides to make the journey back to her hometown of Bethlehem.
- And Ruth (who, as you would guess from the title of the book, turns out to be the other main character in the story) decides to go with her.

It's a series of dramatic and unexpected changes – certainly not what Naomi and Elimelech had planned or imagined on that day they left for Moab.

But that's how life works sometimes, doesn't it? We make our plans, but things change – and sometimes in dramatic and unexpected ways. We lose a spouse; we lose a job; we lose a home. Things backfire. Other times, we actually *plan* for life to change in dramatic way. We choose to begin a new career; we get married; we have kids. In either case, whether we choose it or it happens to us, change can rock our world.

Recently, Abby Thomason, sat down with several North Heartlanders to talk about some big changes that either *have taken place* or are *about to take place* in their lives. We wanted to know what's happened (or happening), how they're handling it, if they have any sense of where God is and what might be next.

So, we're going to take a few minutes to watch and hear their stories. And then we'll come back to Naomi and Ruth and see what we might be able to learn about the final stage that all of us have to go through in times of transition – the new beginning.

Hey, can we say thanks to the folks who were willing to share their stories with us? That was really cool.

And the song we just heard really does express what we believe to be true: that our faith in what God can do gives us the strength to rise – sometimes from the ashes – and to make a new beginning ... which is a good way to describe the end of the story of Ruth and Naomi, as we'll see shortly ...

... but it's also a good way to describe how the end of transition in general works. In fact, "a new beginning" is the exact phrase that Dr. William Bridges, the author of several landmark books on change, uses to describe the third of three phases of transition that we have to go through *internally* whenever change happens *externally*, whether that situational change is something we chose or something that's chosen for us.

Over the past three weeks, we've been using Bridges model as a framework, so let's briefly review it.

The first stage of internal transition, Bridges says, is "The Ending" ...

... where life as we knew comes to an end and we feel a sense of loss and grief and maybe even anger as we're forced to let go of the world as it was and part of our identity in that world.

Stage two is "The Neutral Zone" ...

... where we feel confused and disoriented because we're releasing our attachment to the old world and the identity and purpose that went with it, but it's still not clear what we will be and do in the new world that's been brought about by the change. We're not really sure who we are anymore.

Finally, stage three – which we'll look at today – is the "The New Beginning" ...

... where we begin to develop a new identity and purpose and we're motivated by a vision of who and what we could be and do in the new world that has been brought about by our change.

Now, throughout this series, we've been applying this framework to the story of the Book of Ruth.

We saw two weeks ago that ...

Chapter One of Ruth – when Ruth and her mother-in-law lose their husbands and travel back to Bethlehem in great sadness, mourning and even some anger, that is an illustration of stage one, the ending.

Chapters Two and Three ...

... which we looked at last week – provide an example of stage two, the Neutral Zone. This is true for Ruth, especially, as she is literally, as a woman from Moab, a stranger in a strange land.

But, as we saw, things “just so happen” to work out for her. It “just so happens” that she’s in the right place at the right time with the right person, repeatedly, and winds up getting a wonderful husband by the name of Boaz out of the deal, which brings her (as well as her mother-in-law Naomi) into stage three of transition ...

... the new beginning, the point in time where ...

1. Emotionally, they’ve pretty much let go of life as it was in Moab. That’s not to say they’ve forgotten it (or their deceased husbands), but the overwhelming shock and grief and anger have subsided.
2. They’ve made it through the time of confusion and disorientation: “who are we going to *be* in this new land? How are we going to even have enough to eat? Who will provide for us?” Those immediate questions are answered, for both women, by the Providence of God in the person of Boaz.

Lessons from a New Beginning

And now in stage 3 ... well, I’ll read you the story in just a few minutes, but in order for it to make sense, you have to remember from last week that Ruth and Boaz end up together because Boaz, as it “just so happens,” is a distant relative of Elimelech – Naomi’s husband. And in that culture, there was a law that said that if a man died, one of his *kinsmen* (a brother, an uncle, a cousin) was to “redeem” his family by marrying his widow (if he was single) and providing for his children.

At this point in her life, however, Naomi was beyond the age of any eligible kinsmen redeemers from Elimelech’s family, *but Ruth*, who was married to one of Elimelech’s sons and thus part of his family (and I know this sounds like a soap opera, but hang with me, it’s good), she was not. Ruth, as I said before was probably in her mid-to-late 20s. So, Naomi, who grew up in that culture and understood how things worked, told Ruth to go propose marriage to Boaz, who was single, a bit older and who had been very gracious and kind to her – not ever thinking that she would want to be married to him!

And so when Ruth proposed, Boaz was very flattered and humbled ... and he said “yes.” (This is in Chapter Three, which we talked about last week).

And, through a series of events described in that chapter and the first part of Chapter Four, it came to pass that Boaz took the role of kinsman redeemer for Elimelech.

The Bible tells us that Boaz called a meeting at the gates of the city ...

*Boaz said to the elders and to the crowd standing around, “You are witnesses that today I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion, and Mahlon.
Ruth 4:9 (NLT)*

That was how you redeemed one of your kinsmen. You bought his property. (Apparently, even though he had moved to Moab, Elimelech, and therefore his descendants, still owned land in Israel).

Boaz continued:

And with the land I have acquired [a bonus:] Ruth, the Moabite widow of Mahlon, to be my wife. This way she can have a son to carry on the family name of her dead husband and to inherit the family property here in his hometown."

And Boaz said to them:

"You are all witnesses today."

Then the elders and all the people standing in the gate replied, "We are witnesses!"
Ruth 4:10 (NLT)

And they went on to say a few other interesting things which we'll look at shortly, but let's jump to the conclusion of the story first ... the happy ending part, where it says:

So Boaz took Ruth into his home, and she became his wife. When he slept with her, the LORD enabled her to become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son.
Ruth 4:11 (NLT)

And it was a happy time for everyone, including Naomi.

The Bible says that ...

Naomi [Grandma Naomi] took the baby and cuddled him to her breast. And she cared for him as if he were her own. The neighbor women said, "Now at last Naomi has a son again!"

That's how tight their little family was.

And they named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David. Ruth
4:16-17 (NLT)

... who, as we've said several times was the greatest king Israel ever had, a man God called "a man after my own heart," a man from whose lineage centuries later Mary, the mother of Jesus was descended.

And, as we saw in the first week, that's actually the point of the whole story. All of the "just so happens" that, at the time, seemed to be weaving "just another beautiful and heartwarming tapestry of love," were actually part of God's grand plan to save the world ... which is why one of the takeaways from this story is that *Naomi and Ruth had no idea how much their little lives and especially the losses they had suffered, mattered in the overall scheme of history*. They never knew it then, and, from what we read in the scripture, they never found out in the future what the ultimate purpose of that all was.

There was never a point in the scripture where God appeared to Ruth in a dream and said, "Sweetie, I want you to know the end game. I'm going to reveal this to you - I want you to know that there are big things - world-changing things, eternity-changing things - that are going to happen 13 centuries from now because of the heartbreak you went

through back in Moab; because of the confusion and disorientation you've experienced as a stranger in a strange land here in Israel." There's no evidence anywhere that Ruth ever knew anything more than "wow, I've been through a really hard time, but, God has provided for me and I am a blessed woman."

And that's how it is with us, too. Even though we make it to and through the final stage of transition, we still don't know the ultimate "end game" of that change we went through.

Now, that's not to say that we know *nothing*. We *do* know *something*. We know from the story of Ruth and others like it the general principle that ...

1. Suffering is never wasted in the lives of God's people; that, for those who belong to Christ, all things that happen in our lives – desired or not; good at the time or bad at the time – all those things are working for ultimate good (our good and God's good).

That's exactly what Paul writes in Romans 8:28 ...

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (NIV)

We know it all works for ultimate good. We just don't know *how*. God doesn't tell us the ultimate end game generations from now. But that doesn't mean there isn't one.

For example ... my grandmother on my mother's side was a godly woman. She loved Jesus. She taught my mom and her brothers and sisters about Jesus from the time they were little. She pastored a little church that met in their home. She longed for people to know Christ and his grace and mercy, as she did. She had a heart for people to know the Lord.

Unfortunately, she was also married to a man who was an alcoholic; a man who beat her; a man who would wander off for weeks and months at a time; a man who eventually died in an alcohol-related accident in which he was the drunk driver.

Well, that's the home in which my mom grew up and when my mother turned 16 and got her driver's license, she realized, rightly, that it was in her best interest to move far, far away from that situation. It was a grievous thing for her to do at that age but God was going to work in that suffering and the suffering of her mother to a good end even though they didn't know it.

You see, at the time, my mom had no idea that by moving to Wilmington, N.C. she would run into a guy from Baltimore – my dad – who would become her husband. (Actually, *he* ran into *her* – literally, he hit her with his car. He was going real slow, though). When my mom left home, she had no idea that:

- She would meet Richard Andrew McGinniss ...
- That they would have a son named Richard Andrew, Jr.
- That one day, that son would move to Kansas City and start a church that would impact as many as 1,000 people on a regular basis ...

- That out of that church would come several other guys who would plant other churches ...
- Including a guy named Darrin Patrick who, after serving as our youth pastor for five years, would move to St. Louis ...
- And start a church which would impact as many as 3,000 people on a regular basis.

She had no idea that ...

- That church would start other churches which would eventually impact even more ...
- And that out of that church and this church and all the other churches that have been planted and influenced, thousands of people would come to Christ and have their earthly lives and eternal destinies changed ... *just like her momma had hoped.*

She had no idea that that was going to happen.

Now, just to be clear, my mom and her mom and me – we’re not unique in any sense of the word. What I just described is the kind of thing God does with the suffering of *everyone who belongs to Christ*. But most of the time, we don’t see the ultimate end game (my grandma didn’t) ... which means it’s very hard to judge whether or not what we went through in a major life change was really worth it ...

... which means that, even in the stage of new beginning, the time where a new purpose and new identity is becoming clearer to us ...

2. We still have to learn how to live with ambiguity concerning “the answers.”

We still have to learn how to live with ambiguity concerning the answers. Since we don’t know the ultimate end game years from now, it’s hard to figure out *why* or *how* the past fits into producing it.

And a lot of people get hung up right here in the process of change. Even after they’ve gone through the ending phase of transition and they’re ready to move out of the Neutral Zone – they have some clarity about who they can become in the future – they can’t move on because they’re stuck in an endless loop looking for answers about what happened back there.

A friend of mine several years ago went through an incredibly difficult change in his life that I wouldn’t wish on anyone, but he just had a terrible time moving forward because he kept saying “I need to completely understand the past; I need to what happened and why – in order to be free to live in the future.”

And, I spent many hours with him trying to talk that through, but at one point, I finally had to tell him, “Here’s the truth: you are never going to have all the answers you think you need to have. You just have to accept that and move on.”

And I wonder if some of us today are in the same place. We want to know that what we went through in the past to get to this point was worth it. We know the “general principle” that says yeah it was because God never wastes suffering, but we’re hung up on knowing the ultimate end game. But we can’t see it and we can’t know it. And we just need to accept that and move on.

Moving Forward

The question is ... how do we do that? How do we live with the ambiguity about the past and move forward into the new world, whatever that is for us? There are no easy answers, but I think we might find some help us in some of those other “interesting things” that the elders said to Boaz.

Remember, after Boaz seals the deal and tells the people “you are all witnesses of this; don’t be coming back later and saying somebody else wants to marry Ruth – I’ve got her” they agree and respond, “yes, we are witnesses!” But they go on to say some other interesting and amazing things to Boaz.

They say ...

May the LORD make this woman (Ruth) who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, from whom all the nation of Israel descended! May you prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem.

And may the LORD give you descendants by this young woman who will be like those of our ancestor Perez, the son of Tamar and Judah.” Ruth 4:11-12 (NLT)

Now, I think there are two things to see in this statement; two things that these folks are giving to Boaz and also to Ruth that will help anyone who knows God to move forward with their life.

1. The first one is a sense of God’s blessing over our future.

Twice they say “May the Lord” do this or that ... may God do things – good things – in your future. May God act in your favor. Your, future, Boaz (and Ruth and Naomi), is about God’s action in your life.”

I think that means that, as we struggle with ambiguous answers, or no answers, about the past and how it all connects to the future, if we’re going to move forward, we eventually have to conclude that we don’t need answers as much as we need God. We don’t need answers as much as we need God. In fact, we *can’t* have answers but we can *have* God.

Now, just to be clear, I’m not talking about putting your head in the sand and pretending like nothing ever happened; there was no stress, no struggle, and no hard things. I’m talking about having a perspective that says, “I may not know all the answers about that and why that had to happen, but I know the one who does, and I know He wants to bless me.”

Now, why in the world would anybody have a sense of God’s blessing over their future? Isn’t it kind of presumptuous to think that way? How can you know...

We know this because this is the gospel; that even though we are worse sinners than we’d ever believe. We are undeserving of blessing, we know that. In Christ we have more acceptance, love and blessing than we can ever imagine. We have that sense of blessing because Jesus is our Kinsman Redeemer. In the same way that Boaz was the redeemer for Ruth and Naomi, and he bought their property and set them up for a blessing, Jesus redeemed us with the payment of his life on the cross.

So ... we can have a sense of God's blessing over our future, it's not a make believe thought; it's real ... so, that's the first thing I think that comes through what the elders of the town say to Boaz. But I think something else comes through as well, and that is ...

2. A sense of God's calling on our future.

A sense of God's calling on the future. Notice what they *don't* say, "Boaz, may God make you really really happy and make you really really comfortable. May you be rich and prosperous so that that is how you can live out your days." Clearly, the truth of this was, Boaz was already rich and prosperous. He owned several fields and had workers and was able to buy the land belonging to Elimilech.

Instead, they say, "Boaz, may God bless your marriage and your wife so *that* she can be like the great women before her who have given birth to the People of God. Even though, as a foreigner, she has a few strikes against her (which is what the comparison to Tamar is about), may she, as a foreigner, be like them. May God's good and redeeming purposes for this world be continued through her and through you. What they were saying was, "Boaz, don't forget, your life is as much about what God will do through you as what God wants to do to you and for you."

Now, for those of us who follow Christ, how do we apply that to our lives? How do we know what God wants us to do in the future? Well, I don't know the answer for you. If you tell me your story, I might be able to make some suggestions. How about a summer volunteering in Adventureland?

I don't know the answer for you, but in the end, the question is far more important than the answer. It's the question of "what, God, do you want me to do in this next phase of life now that everything has changed?" Or "How, God, in this next phase do you want me to align my life with your purposes and plans for the redemption of this world that you intend to complete when Jesus returns?" - it's those kinds of questions that generate vision for you and for me. And vision, when it comes from God, becomes calling. And calling gives us clarity when there is no certainty and allows us to move forward.

Now, there is one more pronouncement made by "the people" as the story winds down, this one to Naomi. After Obed is born, the women of the town gather round the newborn baby and his momma and his proud grandma.

The Bible tells us that ...

The women of the town said to Naomi, "Praise the LORD, who has now provided a redeemer for your family! May this child be famous in Israel. May he restore your youth and care for you in your old age.

Again, notice the idea of God's blessing over your future Naomi and God's calling over your future, it's all woven into that statement. But listen to what they add because it is crucial to anyone who is coming through the backend of a major change in life.

It's amazing what they say:

For he [Obed] is the son of your daughter-in-law who loves you and has been better to you than seven sons!"

Ruth 4:14-15 (NLT)

"Your daughter-in-law loves you and has been better to you than seven sons."

One commentator writes, "This is unimaginatively high praise in a culture that valued sons far more than daughters." "The original readers of this story knew the importance of sons, which is why it is such a wonderful shock that the women proclaim that Naomi's daughter-in-law was worth more than a son, more than seven sons. Remember, in that culture, seven is the number of perfection, so what they are saying is Ruth is worth more than the perfect family that Naomi wanted."

"Naomi," the women are asking, "do you see it? Do you see what God has done? Through all of your trouble God has given you a person, unexpectedly, who was better to you than seven sons."

Now, think back and contrast that with what Naomi had said about herself at the very beginning of the story. Remember, she and Ruth were defeated, and they were hungry and they were trudging back to Bethlehem, an uphill journey, 40 miles from Moab to Bethlehem if you look at the geography of it. When they get into town, remember what the people say to Naomi? "Oh my gosh, is that you Naomi? That's not the same woman we remember, who left here so many years ago." And, what does she say? She says, "Don't call me Naomi ... call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. (Mara means bitter) I went away full, and I have come back empty." Remember, that's what she said. But she *didn't come back empty*.

And, that's what the women were pointing out to Naomi and encouraging in her something that is critical whenever you are making a new beginning:

3. An attitude of gratefulness instead of complaint.

See, Naomi originally thought Ruth was a burden; a problem. When you read the story, she was moved that her daughter-in-law wanted to come with her from Moab; it was a very emotional thing. But in reality, the deal was "now I've got another mouth to feed. Oh, and by the way, you're from Moab and people from Israel don't really like people from Moab, so, I've got to deal with that thing. And, you're a young woman and somehow I've got to figure out how to get you married off. I have no other sons who could marry you. You are just a problem." But in the end, Ruth wasn't the problem. Ruth was the answer to the problem. Ruth, the foreigner, turned out to be better than seven sons would have been!

For Naomi to move forward into the future, she had to have that kind of grateful attitude, the kind of attitude that focuses on the unexpected good, the unexpected blessing, instead of the unexpected bad or the unexpected suffering.

And I wonder if some of us maybe need to have the same kind of attitude adjustment, because some of us are just so negative. And, I don't know why this is, but I think some people, by personality, are wired to see what's missing instead

of what's there (the glass half full/half empty thing). But, some of us are just so negative; we're negative about everything. We're looking for the unexpected curse in life instead of the unexpected blessing. But to move forward, you've got to let go of the mentality of being cursed, of the complaining attitude and begin saying, "where has God shown up in history in a way that was unexpected and good. In what way do I have 'seven sons' through what God has done?"

Now, I could probably end here with this and say the three things we can see from what the people told Boaz and Naomi – a sense of God's blessing on your life; a sense of God's calling on your life; and an attitude of gratefulness. And, I think there would be a lot of us who could think about those things and apply them to our lives. But, there is one other thing in this story that is huge, you've got to notice this, and that is, who is doing the talking at the end of the story. See, after they get married, Ruth and Boaz and Naomi say nothing else. The people who are talking are the ones who said, "We are witnesses" ... but they were more than witnesses. They were prophets and encouragers. They provided something for Boaz and Ruth and Naomi that they needed as they were going to move forward out of this change in their lives. Something all of us need to move forward in a big change, and that is:

4. A faith community that will speak blessing, vision, calling and gratefulness over our life.

That's what they were doing. What was happening in their lives was not individualized, there was a community of people who spoke to them and said, "here's the deal, your life going forward will be blessed by God, you are called by God. It's about more than just you. And you can be grateful because when you look at history you see what God was doing in your life – seven sons – better than seven sons."

And, for us, I think this is why church matters so much. And, we've been talking about Adventureland a lot around here lately because we're going into summer and we need help. We may have to close some rooms if we don't get some help in Adventureland. So, every week we're talking about this and we put up a really neat video, and I know you can sit here and think (because I've thought this) "Why do we need Adventureland so bad? Why don't we just close a room? So what?" Or, "Why do we need Student Ministry?" Or, "Why do we need people to help in the Arts Ministry – run cameras, run lights, run sound?" "Why do we need to have small groups? This potluck thing – I've got something else to do on Wednesday night." I mean, we're not just *looking for things to do*. This is not about "we need some things to keep people busy so they'll stay out of trouble." This is a faith community. Because, what we need, in all of life, whether we're transitioning or whatever, we need a community of people who will speak blessing, who will speak calling and vision, who will speak gratefulness over our lives. And, let me ask you a question – where else are you going to get that? Where else are you going to be a part of a group of people who are together because they know, "we're worse sinners than we could ever believe, but, we're more loved in Christ than we could ever imagine." Where else are you going to get that? That's why you need a faith community. That's why we do this.

Conclusion

The way we're going to close the service today is a little different. And, I don't want to freak any of you out, because I know some of us have space issues (we don't want people getting in our space), but in just a minute, here's what I'm

going to ask you to do – we’re going to be a faith community. We’re going to speak blessing, actually I’m going to speak it, but I’ll speak it for all of us. Blessing, calling and vision, gratefulness over our lives. We’re going to do this as a community. I’ll ask you to stand and just put your hand on somebody’s shoulder, preferably somebody who is not in your family, because this is not a blood relative thing. This is a family of faith, a faith community. You don’t have to weird out, it’s not going to last very long. So, just stand up, put your hand on someone’s shoulder and I’m going to speak a blessing over you.

Okay, here’s the deal, some of the people in your circle or row are going through some major changes in their life right now. Some of us are not, but all of us need these things from our faith community, so I’m going to speak these things, but really we’re all saying these things together, we’re all in this together. So, here’s the blessing:

The Lord bless you, and keep you;

*The Lord make His face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you;*

The Lord lift up His countenance on you

and give you peace [shalom – prosperity, wholeness, completeness] in every area of your life - emotionally, physically, spiritually, economically. And, may He do this not just for your good, but for the good of the redemption of this world, for the glory of God, for the Kingdom of Christ, in whose name we pray and in whose name we give this blessing.

Numbers 6:24-26 (NASB)

Amen.

Thank you for coming and see you Wednesday night!