

A number of years ago, several college students shared the gospel with one of their classmates who happened to be Hindu. The Hindu student knew that there was a God, yet he could not grasp the Christian concept that God actually visited this world in the person of Jesus Christ.

*One day while walking through a field and wrestling with this concept of God in his mind, he observed an anthill that was in the path of a farmer plowing his field. Belonging to a particular Hindu sect, he believed that all life was sacred: a cow, a cobra, even an ant – and gripped with concern, the Hindu wanted to warn the ants of the impending danger. **But how?** He could shout to them, but they would not hear. He could write to them, but they would not be able to read. **How then could he communicate with the ants?** Then it struck him. Out of sheer love, he wished that he could become an ant, for if this had been possible, he could have warned them before it was too late. Then he realized this was what his Christian classmates were trying to tell him about Jesus. At last, he understood how God had called to mankind through prophets, but we wouldn't listen. He wrote to us, but we refused to read, so out of sheer love, Jesus Christ – Himself God – stepped out of heaven and took on a body of flesh to reach a lost and fallen world.*

Since September, we have been slowly making our way through the letter of **1 John**, and if you recall from last week, the Apostle John was concerned about deception which had crept into the early church. There were false preachers and teachers and missionaries who would just show up at the church out of the blue. They would claim to speak for God, and in their claims, they said that Jesus did not come in the flesh, but rather He was more like a phantom or an apparition.

Well, to John these claims were complete nonsense because he and the other apostles had been with Jesus – they watched Him, they heard Him, they touched Him, they ate with Him, and they lived with Him. They were eyewitnesses that Jesus was, in fact, both God and man. Jesus was God in the flesh – He became like us, and this morning, I want to use that gospel truth as a springboard for some Christmas related messages during the next several weeks.

As you know, Christmas is the time of the year where we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, where in a humble setting, He emptied Himself, left the heavenly realm, and He entered our world in the flesh as a helpless newborn baby.

That's the miracle of Christmas. God came to us in the flesh. He gave Himself to us, He connected with us, and He showed His love for us. That's what Christmas is all about, and in light of what God has done on our behalf, in light of this gospel truth, Christmas should be a joyous time of celebration for us – ideally.

I say “ideally” because for many, this time of the year can be very difficult. For many, the Christmas season has become a time of worry and stress and depression. For many, Christmas has become a time of loneliness and grieving over those who are dearly missed, and for many, Christmas might even be a time of wondering where is this Savior whose being celebrated. **Where is God in my life, because right now He seems so distant and so silent?**

Now, this might come as a surprise to you, but those kinds of sad thoughts are actually very consistent with the Christmas story that we are all familiar with.

Did you know that before there was a Mary and Joseph, before there was a baby in a manger, before there were angels singing on high, before there were shepherds in the field hearing the good news for the first time – God seemed distant and silent for 400 years?

That page in your Bible that separates the Old Testament from the New Testament represents 400 long years of silence by God. It represents a time when it seemed that God was distant and no longer involved in the lives of people.

For the last couple of weeks, I have been thinking about the story of **Ruth** – a story I have shared with some of you before – a story I feel like I need to share with you again, so turn in your Bible to **Ruth** and we will begin with the first five verses which sets the stage for this story behind the Christmas story.

¹Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. ³Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. ⁴They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. ⁵Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

This story occurred during the time when the **judges** ruled – a time before kings – a time when God’s people did what was right in their own eyes – which was usually wrong. It was a dark and difficult time for God’s people, a time of idolatry, and cruelty, and chaos – a time where anything goes, and we are told it was also a time of **famine** – probably the result of God’s judgment against His people.

In this passage, we are also introduced to a family of four, comprised of Elimelech, Naomi his wife, and their two sons. Because of the famine, they left Bethlehem, they left their Promised Land, and they ventured east, past the Jordan River to relocate in a foreign land where food was available – the land of **Moab**.

Times were really hard for this family – but at least they had each other – at least for a while. As time goes by, Elimelech dies and Naomi becomes a single mom of two sons. Now, the sons were not married, and the only women in Moab were Moabite women, and so the sons marry some local girls, but unfortunately, sometime later, the two sons die as well.

This must have been a devastating time for Naomi. Her husband is gone and her two boys are gone. It must have seemed like everyone she loved was torn away from her – her life was falling apart, and I have no doubt that she was asking the same questions that we would have asked. **Why? Why has this happened to me and my family? What are you doing Lord? Where are You?**

So, this Jewish widow Naomi, is in a foreign land, with two daughters-in-law who are also widows. They are all in serious trouble and Naomi tells them she is returning to her hometown of Bethlehem, to her own people, and they should leave her and return to their own Moabite people, maybe remarry for they were young, and live a happy new life. Naomi understood that in their male dominated culture, their safety, their security and their well-being was directly dependent upon a family link with a man, and the death of their husbands meant the loss of their support, which often resulted in homelessness and destitution. Essentially, they would have to resort to begging or maybe even worse just to survive. It was a terrible and dangerous situation for the three of them.

After some convincing, one daughter returns to her own people, but the other refuses to abandon Naomi. We are told this, beginning with **verse 16**,

¹⁶ But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus, may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.” ¹⁸ When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Ruth loved Naomi, so much so, that she was willing to leave her own land and her own people to remain by Naomi’s side. Ruth is stuck to her mother-in-law like glue, and these two widows make their way to Bethlehem. When they arrive in Bethlehem, after many years of being away, Naomi is recognized by the local

people and she is welcomed back home. There is a joyful buzz in the neighborhood, but Naomi quickly “rains on their parade” so to speak. Look at what she says beginning in **verse 20**.

²⁰ She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

Naomi speaks from years of hardship, she is broken-hearted, and she tells the people not to call her Naomi which means “*pleasant*” but to instead call her **Mara** which means “*bitter*” – for life has been difficult and bitter for her.

And then she speaks of God as the One who is all-powerful, but yet, He is also the One who has no compassion for her. Yes, Naomi recognizes God as being sovereign – but to her, He is not gracious and merciful, for He took her husband and her two sons. Naomi says she was **full**, but God has left her **empty** – He is the source of her suffering – He does not care about her.

Now without meddling, some of you might feel a little like Naomi this morning, as your life seems empty. You are at the end of your rope, you have fought and fought, and now you are out of gas physically, and mentally, and emotionally. Like Naomi, you feel completely spent, and it seems that God is so distant and so silent.

Listen to this quote. *“When you are happy, so happy you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be — or so it feels— welcomed with open arms.*

But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting locks on the inside. After that, silence.”

Do you know who wrote that? It was C.S. Lewis when dealing with the loss of his wife Helen. C.S. Lewis was speaking from a very raw and honest heart – he was being real, and just so you know, he was a believer when he wrote that. In some respects, I think C.S. Lewis felt just like Naomi.

Now before we go any further, there are two observations I want to make.

I understand that Naomi was hurting – she had suffered terrible losses – she felt that God did not care about her, but Naomi had no idea that God was very near and

very involved in her difficult and trying circumstances, and unbeknownst to her, He had a purpose and a plan far beyond she could ever imagine – something she will later come to understand, because just like us, it's often easier to see the hand of God in our lives from the rear-view mirror.

Secondly, Naomi told the town's people that she was **empty**, that God had taken everything from her, but she completely overlooked a special gift that God had given her – it was the love of Ruth. Ruth was a gift from God. **How often do we overlook, and take for granted, and under appreciate those people, those gifts that God has placed in our lives?**

So, the story continues.

In Bethlehem, it was the barley harvest season. According to the Law of Moses, the land owners were only allowed to harvest their fields one time and anything not harvested was available to the widows and to the poor to gather for themselves. This was their version of a food bank.

So, Ruth went out to join the poor and the widows – to pick up the scraps of left-over barley, and Ruth randomly enters a field – just by chance, and picks up grain. Little did she know that this random field just so happened to be the property of a man named Boaz.

Well, Boaz later goes out to his fields and sees this woman out there that he does not recognize, and he asks his foreman – **who's that woman?** And the foreman tells Boaz it is Ruth – a widowed Moabite, who left her own people, and chose to remain faithful to her widowed mother-in-law Naomi. So, word had already spread about Ruth – and Boaz went to speak to her.

Boaz told Ruth that he had heard of what she had done for her mother-in-law, he blessed her, and he made it clear that she was very welcome to glean from his field with his own maids. She was also invited to drink their water and to eat with them at mealtime. Boaz also told his foreman to look after Ruth, to ensure no harm came to her, for she was a foreign woman with no protection and no rights, and finally, the foreman was also instructed to “accidentally” leave extra bundles of barley behind for Ruth to gather and take home.

Ruth is very successful with her gleaning in the field and she returns home to Naomi, and Naomi asks her, **“So where did you work today?”** And Ruth tells Naomi that she randomly chose to work in a field owned by a really nice guy named Boaz, and oddly enough, she has found favor with him. Well, Naomi responds, *“That's an unbelievable coincidence, it must be a God-thing, because of*

all the fields you could have chosen to work in, you chose a field belonging to Boaz – who just so happens to be one of our closest relatives.” Boaz was related to Naomi’s late husband Elimelech.

Now this is really important because in their culture, there was this role of a person called a **Kinsman-Redeemer** described in the law. A kinsman-redeemer was a male relative – the closest male relative – who if he was willing and able, could act on behalf of another relative who was in trouble, or in danger, or in need. For example, a kinsman-redeemer could repurchase lost property on behalf of a relative to keep it in the family, they could buy back a relative who had been sold into slavery, they could provide for those who were poor and destitute, and in some cases, they could assure that the family line continued if a husband died without leaving a son. If a widow had no son, she could request that the kinsman-redeemer take her and produce children to continue the family line.

Naomi realizes that Boaz could potentially serve as a kinsman-redeemer for them both because her late husband had property and Ruth had no children to carry on the family line of her husband.

So, after the harvest season, Naomi devised a plan so that Ruth could express her feelings for Boaz without creating embarrassment. Ruth waits for Boaz to lie down for the night after a long day in the field, she uncovers his feet, and she lies down at his feet. This was an ancient Near Eastern custom. In the middle of the night, Boaz awakens and was startled to find Ruth laying at his feet. Then Ruth asks Boaz to “**spread his covering over her**” – essentially asking Boaz to put the authority of his house over her – which, in effect, was her marriage proposal to him.

Boaz says “yes”, and after working out a minor issue with a closer male relative, Boaz does the honorable thing and marries Ruth.

Boaz and Ruth have a boy named Obed and there is a precious scene at the end where Naomi is holding Obed in her lap as she takes on her new role of a proud grandmother. Naomi holds this baby with the fresh understanding that God was not against her and did not abandon her after all.

So, that’s the end of the story, **but didn’t I tell you this was the story behind the Christmas story?**

As I just mentioned, Boaz and Ruth had a son, and his name was **Obed**. Obed grows up, gets married and he has a son named **Jesse**. Jesse grows up, gets married and he had eight sons.

Years go by, and God says something to the prophet Samuel. God tells Samuel it is time for new leadership, and He is about to do something new in Israel that will have lasting ramifications for thousands of years.

God tells Samuel to go to Bethlehem and to seek out Jesse because God had chosen one of Jesse's sons to be the next king, and the son that God had chosen was **David** – the son of Jesse – the son of Obed – whose parents were Boaz and Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi.

And years later, the prophet Nathan tells King David, “*Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.*” From this, it was understood that the future kings, to include the King of kings, would come from the royal line of King David.

And numerous births later, which are reflected in the genealogy record in **Matthew Chapter 1** – Jesus, who was in the royal line of King David, took on flesh and was born in the little town of Bethlehem.

Now let's look at this story from the rear-view mirror.

Naomi's life had fallen apart and she felt that God was against her – that He did not care about her, but we now see that God very near and very involved in her life. God had a plan and a purpose. Naomi thought she was forgotten by God, and over 3000 years later, we are still talking about her.

Unknown to her, Naomi was not abandoned by God like she felt, but in fact, God had placed her right smack dab in middle of something amazing and wondrous that He was doing that would change the course of human history. Naomi had no idea that through her suffering and hardship and loss, God was preparing the way for the Savior of the world through the union of Boaz and Ruth. Naomi had no idea that God was personally working in her life the entire time to do something far beyond she could ever imagine. She was one of the main characters in the story behind the Christmas Story.

Christmas is about many things, but Christmas also reminds us that even when life is hard and God seems so distant and so silent – He's still involved – He's still near – He still cares – and whether you know it or not, He's doing a work in your life.

And how do I know this? Because this message of redemption, and encouragement, and hope is consistent with the truth of God's Word, and because after 400 years of silence, in the little town of Bethlehem, God did something that spoke much louder than words – He did His greatest work by sending Jesus – in the flesh, into a lost and dying world – ultimately to save it.

Source Material:

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Exposition Commentary – Warren Wiersbe
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Enduring Word – David Guzik
A Grief Observed – C.S. Lewis