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Sermon

Introduction.

- a. At the heart of God's eternal Covenant with his people, there is a wonderful pledge and promise: *'I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.'* (**Leviticus 26:12**) This pledge and promise is repeated in **Jeremiah 30:22** and directly applied to the New Covenant in **Revelation 21:3**. By God's grace and mighty power believers have this security: *I belong to the LORD and the LORD belongs to me.* Christians find it easy to say, *'I belong to the Lord,'* but feel a bit awkward in saying, *'the Lord belongs to me.'* This is simply a different way of saying, *'the Lord is my God.'* Think about the signs of the covenant, circumcision, Passover, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, they all talk about belonging to the God of the covenant. When you profess your faith, you are essentially telling others that you belong to the Lord. At a wedding the bride and groom exchange vows and rings and then they are proclaimed husband and wife. The vows, rings, and change in marital status are all aspects of a public declaration that this man and woman belong to each other. This belonging to each other is emphasised by the proclamation, *'Whom God has joined together let not man put asunder.'* The wife belongs to the husband, and the husband belongs to the wife. The wife's surname is changed indicating that she now belongs to her husband. Adam expressed this sense of belonging when the Lord presented Eve to him in the garden, listen to **Genesis 2:23** *'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'* God, the Holy Spirit moved Moses to add the commentary found in the next verse, *'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.'* The close bond and sense of belonging is such that God says, *the two shall become one flesh.* Husband and wife belong to each other as your arm or your leg belongs to your body.
- b. I am convinced that the general sense of Scripture compels us to believe that God created us with a *deep inner need to belong to others.* In the nineteen sixties Simon and Garfunkel sang the song *I am a rock*, which talks about a method of overcoming the pain of heartbreak. Listen

to some of the lyrics; *'I've built walls, a fortress deep and mighty, that none may penetrate I have no need for friendship, friendship causes pain It's laughter and it's loving I disdain. I am a rock, I am an island. I have my books and my poetry to protect me I am shielded in my armour, hiding in my room, safe within my womb I touch no one and no one touches me I am a rock, I am an island. And a rock feels no pain and an island never cries.'* Notice the hard work expressed in building a mighty fortress, and in developing a shield and armour, and hiding in a room for protection. Also note the price of being a rock includes, no need of friendship, a disdain for laughter and loving, and emotional deadness expressed in the words, *I touch no one and no one touches me*. The truth is no man or woman is a rock or an island, they need to belong, they need to love and be loved. God's relationship with mankind has always been Covenantal, which strongly emphasises the sense of belonging.

- c. A sense of belonging is strongly bound up with our identity. As a child you would have been asked: *'What is your name? Who are your Father and mother? Where do you live? What work does your father do? What school do you go to?'* The answers to these few questions enables others to determine your identity and social class. Your identity and social class are bound up with whom you belong to and which group belongs to you. Spiritually your identity is strongly bound up with whom you belong to. Listen to Jesus speaking to the Pharisees in **John 8:42-44 (NIV)** *'If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I come from God and now am here, I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.'* Jesus tells us that we either belong to God or to the devil. A massive part of your identity is bound up with your answer to the question; *to whom do you belong?* Knowing the answer to this question is fundamental to your sense of security, purpose, meaning and function in life. Having made this point I now need to show you why it is vital to our understanding of **Ruth 1:1-6**.

The place beyond sorrow is a place of deep soul searching.

- a. I used the phrase *beyond sorrow* to describe the pain and the emptiness Naomi experienced when her husband and two sons died. Naomi found no comfort in the Lord and blamed the Lord for her situation and circumstances. I believe we can hear Naomi's anger at the Lord in **Ruth 1:13** when she says, *'No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!'* When a person blames the Lord for their plight and harbours anger in their heart against the Lord, they find no comfort in the Lord or his word. The statement Naomi makes in **Ruth 1:20** is extremely important, listen to her statement: *'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.'* Naomi is claiming to have had a change of identity and a change of personality because God's hand has been against her. We really do need to understand how Naomi got to this conclusion, as it helps us understand ourselves, life and God's dealings with his people.
- b. When Naomi left Bethlehem she departed *full*, but when she returned to Bethlehem from Moab she was *empty*. What caused her to feel *full* when she left, and what caused her to feel *empty* when she returned? If we had put the question *'To whom do you belong'* to Naomi before she left to go to Moab, she would have said that she belonged to Elimelech. Her identity was bound up with him and their life together with their sons. Her purpose and meaning of life was anchored on belonging to Elimelech, he provided her with security and comfort. Because the husband and wife belong to each other they know they have a safety net to catch the one who falls off the tightrope of life. The husband is a safety net for his wife and the wife the safety-net for her husband. A serious aspect of the joy of marriage is that deep sense of knowing you belong to someone, and together with that person your life has purpose and meaning and significance. *This sense of husband and wife belonging to each other is vitally important in the marriage*, however your spouse must never become the primary source of your sense of belonging; the Lord is the source of your primary sense of belonging. As a husband I should and would be delighted if my wife told me she could never love me as much as she loves the Lord, she could never be committed to me as much as she is committed to the Saviour, and she could never desire to please me more than she desires to please Jesus. I need to fully grasp the fact that my wife belongs to the Lord and always will

and therefore I will never be her first and foremost love. My wife should rejoice in the knowledge that I belong to the Lord and therefore the same realities apply. When a believer marries an unbeliever, the unbeliever will require the believer to make them their primary source of belonging and supply the purpose, meaning and the significance to life. It is easy to understand why this would lead to tension and friction, and how a believer who is married to an unbeliever would constantly be tempted to leave the Lord as their first and foremost love.

- c. I am convinced that Naomi yielded to temptation and looked to Elimelech for her primary sense of belonging, rather than finding that sense of belonging in the Lord. The only adequate answer to the questions *'To whom do you belong'* is: *'I belong to the Lord.'* Your sense of purpose, meaning and significance in life must be firmly rooted and grounded in belonging to the Lord. Believers ought to have as the rock solid foundation of their lives the indisputable fact: *I belong to the Lord, he is my God, Father, Creator, Master, and King, my life is lived for him. Your primary sense of belonging must be found in the Lord.* The starting point for defining your identity must be the Lord, and the fact that you belong to him. You rob God of his glory if you make your husband, wife or children the primary source of your sense of belonging. Many believers yield to this temptation and make their spouse or children the primary source of their sense of belonging and identity. Listen to the words of a love song by Barry White, *'My first, my last, my everything, and the answer to all my dreams, you are my sun, my moon, my guiding star, my kind of wonderful that's who you are.'* This is not only sentimental balderdash, but it also says, *you are my god.* Sadly many people do think about life in these terms. In our self-centred world where the attitude is: *If you love me, then your life revolves around me, I am the centre of your universe,* self-worship is the most common form of idolatry. God, and God alone must be the centre of your universe and he is the reason for living. Naomi's life was full because Elimelech gave her a sense of belonging, meaning and purpose, when he died her life was empty. The Apostle Paul in **2 Corinthians 5:17** says, *'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.'* You are made new by Christ who gives you a new sense of belonging, and a new purpose, meaning and significance in life. If you belong to God you are a new person, your inner identity has changed, being full in this way can never be lost. It is critical to determine whether or not our primary sense of belonging is in the Lord. If it is not, then the scaffolds and supports of your life are not biblical and will either collapse under the weight of life or the Lord will push them over.
- d. When Elimelech died Naomi found that the death of her spouse ended her sense of belonging purpose, meaning and significance to life. Because Elimelech was her primary sense of belonging, Naomi did not trust the Lord to be her safety net. When Job lost his possessions and children he fell on the safety-net of the Lord's grace and not onto his wife. When Elimelech died Naomi had no safety net, so her world collapsed. I suggest that after Elimelech's death Naomi made her children the primary source of her sense of belonging, and made Mahlon and Chilion her safety-net. When they died, she sought to find her sense of belonging in her daughter-in-laws, but they could not meet the requirement needed for a safety-net. In the days of the Judges three destitute widows living together in Moab would have been vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. It is important to note that they were destitute. A rich widow would have men lining up to marry her no matter what religion she practiced or how old, fat, ugly and rude she was. These three widows found very little comfort in being able to say *we belong to each other.* The searching question, *to whom do I belong* would have left these widows restless, fearful, uneasy and looking for security.
- e. When Naomi heard *that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread,* it prompted an answer to the question *to whom do I belong?* In her heart and mind she would have answered, *I am one of the LORD'S people, I belong to him.* If she belonged to the Lord, then in his land she would find the security she so desperately needed. It was only because Naomi was at the place *beyond sorrow* that this answer came to her mind and animated her will to return to Bethlehem. It was only in the place *beyond sorrow* that she began to redefine her identity in terms of belonging to the Lord.
- f. When Naomi heard *that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread,* it prompted an answer to the question *to whom do I belong?* In her heart and mind she would have answered, *I am one of the LORD'S people, I belong to him.* If she belonged to the Lord, then

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- g. Exactly the same thing happens in the parable of the prodigal son, when he ran out of money and friends he is compelled to redefine his identity. When a young Jewish man desires to eat the swill fed to pigs because nobody would give him anything, you know that he has reached the place *beyond sorrow*. Listen to **Luke 15:17**, *'But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!'* What does Luke mean when he says, *he came to himself*? Some think that it means that he came to his senses, and this is reflected in many translations. I think it is telling us that he came to the point where he began to think clearly about himself and his life. Prior to this point he had no idea whether he was coming or going, he was confused, lonely, sad, bewildered, isolated and miserable. The prodigal son asked himself the questions: *who am I, what am I doing, what am I doing in this strange land, where do I belong, to whom do I belong and what do I need to do?* In **Luke 15:18** these questions are answered by the prodigal son, he says, *'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."*' Notice he confesses his sinfulness, fully recognises that he has offended God and his father, he accepts that his behaviour has made him unworthy to be called his father's son, and pleads to be accepted as a hired hand. This is a very different person to the hot shot who had all the answers about life and went to a strange land to enjoy real life with wine, woman and song. Clearly he has redefined his identity; he knows he is not that swaggering dandy who left his father's home. When he got home his father put a ring on his finger, the meaning of the ring was simply *you belong to me*. The fact that he knew his father's loving and caring character helped him to go back to where he belonged.
- h. Naomi, a destitute widow would have asked the same questions as the prodigal son did when she heard that the Lord had visited his people and that there was bread in Bethlehem once more. Notice we are not simply told that the drought had ended, but that *the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread*. The emphasis is upon the Lord and what he has done; he visited his people and gave them bread. This is the first mention of the Lord in the book of Ruth and speaks of God's grace and mercy. The word translated as *visit* is very interesting, listen to the comments made by **Vines Expository Dictionary**, *The verb is used in an expression which is unique to Hebrew and which shows great intensity of meaning. Such an occurrence appears in Exodus 3:16ff., in which it is used twice in two different grammatical forms to portray the intensity of the action; the text reads (literally): "Looking after, I have looked after".... The usage refers to God's intervention in His saving the children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. The same verb in a similar expression can also be used for divine intervention for punishment: (Jeremiah 9:9), which means literally: "Shall I not punish them for these things?"* The word is full of purpose and intent. When the Lord visited the Promised Land with the drought (**Ruth 1:1**) it was a visitation of judgment. In **Ruth 1:6** the Lord visited his people bringing bread; this was a visitation of blessing. The fact that it was a time of blessing rather than chastisement would have greatly encouraged Naomi to return to Bethlehem. The uniqueness of the word (*visited*) would have brought to Naomi's remembrance the amazing benevolence of God towards his people. God's providence was providing the most suitable answer to the question *what can I do?* The answer it was prompting was, *return to Bethlehem*. The fact that Naomi packed her possessions and set off for Bethlehem with her two daughters-in-law in tow, reveals that the *urge* to return to Bethlehem was very strong. The Lord was at work in Naomi to do exactly what he purposed. What was happening to Naomi is expressed by the Apostle Paul in **Philippians 2:13**, *'for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.'* The place *beyond sorrow* not only brought Naomi to the place where she had no one to turn to other than the Lord; it also brought her to the place where she was willing and eager to do what God willed. She really wanted to do the Lord's will, in this case it was his secret will, but her attitude and focus had changed. The death of Elimelech and her two sons had caused her world to collapse, now the Lord was putting in place a fundamental principle on which her new life would be built, *Naomi wanted to do what the Lord willed*. If you put the question, *to whom do you belong* to Naomi at the close of **Ruth 1:6**, she would in all probability not have answered you, but the

answer was being formulated in Naomi's heart and mind, *I belong to the Lord, and I really want to do his will.*

Conclusion

Jonah was on his way to the place *beyond sorrow* when the Lord stirred up the sea and threatened the lives of all on board the ship. Listen to the questions the sailors put to Jonah, *"Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"* Jonah answers the question saying, *"I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."* There is one question Jonah ignores; the question is: *what is your occupation?* The question Jonah was avoiding asked him to reveal *whom do you belong to?* Who was Jonah? *He was a prophet of the living God running away from the very thing that gave him his identity, purpose, meaning and significance to life.* He was denying who he was and was unwilling to do what the Lord willed. Three days and three nights inside the belly of a big fish made him willing to do exactly what the one to whom he belong required of him. *To whom do you belong?* The reality of who you are depends on the answer you give to this question. Do you belong to the Lord?