

## **RUNNING ON EMPTY**

### **Ruth 1**

(see also Stephen Shoemaker, *God Stories*, p. 104 ff.)

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“Running on Empty.” It’s more than just the title of Jackson Browne’s 1977 album and hit song that reached #3 on the Billboard Pop Albums chart in 1978. Stayed on the charts for 65 weeks.

“Running on empty,” then and now, is a popular metaphor for being absolutely exhausted. Perhaps it’s the “after Easter effect” in believers who just recently celebrated the joy of the empty tomb, only to find themselves exhausted in grief yet again.

Browne said for him, “running on empty” was also quite literal. He told Rolling Stone magazine that, while he was driving back and forth to the studio each day to record his album *The Pretender*, “I was always driving around with no gas in the car, I just never bothered to fill the tank because how far was it to the studio anyway? Just a few blocks.”

The song goes:

Looking out at the road rushing under my wheels  
Looking back at the years gone by like so many summer fields  
‘65, I was 17 and running up 101  
I don’t know where I’m running now, I’m just running on.

Running on...running on empty  
Running on...running blind  
Running on...running into the sun  
But I’m running behind.

It continues:

Everyone I know, everywhere I go  
People need some reason to believe

.....

Looking out at the road rushing under my wheels  
I don’t know how to tell you all just how crazy this life feels  
Look around for the friends that I used to turn to to pull me through  
Looking into their eyes, I see them running too.

Running on...running on empty  
Running on...running blind  
Running on...running into the sun  
But I’m running behind.

Running on empty is not a good thing. I did a little research this week. I know that some of you try to stretch it out and coast into the gas station on just the fumes of fuel. But mechanics tell us that the fuel pump is cooled by the fuel around it, and to run dry puts the fuel pump at risk of premature failure. Over time, dirt and debris can accumulate at the bottom of the fuel tank, and to let it run that low, your pump may start pulling in some of the debris along with the remaining gas. This can clog your fuel filter and may allow sediment to reach your engine, which can cause significant damage over time.

One mechanic concluded that driving on low fuel frequently leads to a gradual decline in your vehicle's overall performance. You'll notice decreased acceleration, rough idling, and even difficulty starting the car. The stress of running on empty has taken its toll on your car. ("Can Driving on an Empty Fuel Tank Damage My Car?" <https://driveautocare.com>, 8/30/24)

Sometimes after Easter hope, we find ourselves again in the emptiness of grief, and we feel like we, too, are running on empty, coasting on fumes – our tank is empty.

Do you know the emptiness of grief? That hollow pit in your stomach after the death of someone you love so much. My, how life is changed now that they are gone. You have got to totally redefine who you are. They were you. They were such a big part of your life. There is something missing. That's an awful, empty feeling.

That empty feeling after a miscarriage – going to have fullness, and now you have emptiness. Or that emptiness after they go off to college. Shhhh. Do you hear that? Nothing. You hear nothing. They're gone. And so are the many little things that remind you of her every day. It won't ever really be just like that again.

The empty feeling in your gut after a divorce. It all started out so wonderfully. Joy. Hope. Just like the fairy tale, you were going to live happily ever after. It didn't happen. He cheated on you, and now you're bitter. You're empty.

Do you know what it feels like to run on empty? To experience grief? Well, Naomi did. Oh, listen my children and you shall hear the tale I'm going to tell. Where do I begin? Where do I end?

Look at chapter 1, verse 20 of Ruth:

Don't call me Naomi (Naomi means sweet, pleasant); but call me Mara (bitter), for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

Look at verse 21

I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back – there is the word – empty.

Things had not gone as Naomi had hoped. The story begins with a series of tragedies. There is a famine in Bethlehem. That's odd. The word Bethlehem means "the house of bread." Now the house of bread has no bread. A certain man named Elimelech left and traveled to the land of Moab with his wife Naomi and their two sons. Probably a man of means. Probably moving to take care of his family.

Yet, in fleeing death they run right into death. First, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a single parent of two lads in a foreign land. The two sons, Mahlon (which means sickly) and Chilion (which means failing) eventually took Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. But the boys' names must have been prophetic because within a few years both the sons were dead, leaving their wives childless as well as husbandless.

The story begins with an unrelenting wave of grief. Poor Naomi. Her husband is dead. Now her two sons have died, leaving her destitute in a foreign land. I'll say, Naomi, you went out full, and you came back empty. Naomi is, indeed, at the end of her tether and can only hope that God is on the other side.

Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem. The famine was over, so she headed home, taking her two daughters-in-law with her. But somewhere along the way, she stopped. She tried to persuade Ruth and Orpah to go back to Moab.

Look at her speech in chapter 1, verses 8 and 9.

"Go, return, each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May the Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of another husband." She kissed them. They lifted their voices and wept. And they said, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me?"

It's a hard scene. Three women who had experienced tragedy, each losing their husband, having in union the death of Naomi's sons. She bids them go back to their families. To go back and find new husbands. To go back and make a life for themselves, for she had no life to offer them. Besides, even if she had new sons, could they wait that long to marry again? Of course not. She had nothing to offer. She was running on empty back to Bethlehem.

They wept aloud, insisting on going with her. But she insisted they go back. With that, Orpah turned to go home. But Ruth still clung to her mother-in-law. And then this heroine uttered those timeless words that will stand for all eternity. Look at verse 16. "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. 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."

You have to know just a bit of the story to understand what is taking place here. Ruth was a Moabite. Yahweh was not her God. In Deuteronomy 23, verse 3 and 6 it says, "No Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation. None of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt. And because they hired against you Balaam to curse you....You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live."

Wow. The hatred between the Israelites and the Moabites was worse than that even against the Egyptians or the Edomites. For they were not allowed to join in worship with the people of God.

Decades of hurt and spite were buried in those words. And now the Moabite Ruth – God is going to use her to help Naomi.

As they return, the people rush out to meet Naomi. And she says “Don’t call me the sweet one. Call me the bitter one, Mara, because I’m empty.” Her grief had turned to the dark shadows of bitterness, which is where grief often lodges. And there Naomi slumped into the passivity of depression. She is running on empty.

Ruth sprang into action. See her now, as she gleans in the field. It was a kind law. The loose barley and wheat dropped at the harvest was to be left for the gleaning – for those who were poor, indigent, foreign. As she gleaned the field of Boaz, a wealthy, older landowner, Ruth caught his eye. “Who is that woman?” he asked his workers as he visited the field and bid them God’s blessing. “She is a Moabite woman who came back with Naomi. She has been on her feet since early morning, gathering enough for the two of them.”

When she asks why Boaz is kind to her, notice what he says in chapter 2, verse 11. “All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under – listen carefully – whose wings you have come to seek refuge.”

Boaz told his servants, “You let her get the wheat she wants. In fact, you’d better drop a little bit right where she is gleaning.”

“Where did you get all that wheat?” asked Naomi.

“The nicest man, named Boaz, let me glean his fields.”

“Oh, he’s our relative, one of our closest relatives,” she replied. I think Naomi was the first to see the spark of romance between Ruth and Boaz. It’s just a glimpse. In chapter 2, verse 20, Naomi, who had said God was destroying her, now said, “May Boaz be blessed of the Lord who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead.”

Now matchmaking doesn’t always work out. Though they had met in the field, Naomi wanted to send Ruth and Boaz on something of a blind date.

When I was in high school, I used to hate to go on blind dates. What if you don’t like them? One of my friends was trying to set me up on a blind date. I was refusing to go. The more he told me what a great personality she had, the more frightened I became. I’d heard that line before. I feared what that meant. I could read between the lines. He said, “Why don’t you use my trick. You go to the door. You ring the doorbell. You open the door. If you don’t like her looks, you feign an asthma attack. Say that you’re sorry but the date’s called off. Begin breathing heavily and struggling to get your breath. Go to your car and you’re scot free.”

Well, that sounded like a good plan. No risk there. I went to the door, dreading it all the time. The door opened and she was drop dead gorgeous. Wow! I was all in for this blind date! All of a sudden she got this puzzled look on her face. “What’s wrong?” I said. “What’s wrong?”

She said, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I can go. I’m having an asthma attack.” She clutched her neck, closed the door and retreated back inside.

Matchmaking doesn’t always go well, but it’s going to go well for Naomi. Naomi concocted a plan. She told Ruth to go where Boaz was sleeping. About midnight Boaz reached for his covers and behold, a strange woman. “Who are you?” he asked. “I’m Ruth, your maidservant,” she replied. Then she proposed to him on the spot.

This is how she said it. Look at chapter 3, verse 9.  
And he said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative.”

You remember what Boaz had said back in chapter 2? Look at chapter 2, verse 12  
May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.

Seems like she is saying, as Stephen Shoemaker says, practice what you preach.

Boaz accepted, verse 10. “May God bless you, my daughter. You have been kinder to me even than you have been to Naomi. You could have gone after the young men. But you came after me.”

There is a problem. There is tension in the text. There is another kinsman redeemer, by the law who was a closer relative than was Boaz. If he wanted to, he had the right to marry Ruth and take care of Ruth and Naomi and take over their land. “If he won’t redeem you,” said Boaz, “I will.”

The next day Boaz goes to the gate where men gather to do business. He sees the kinsman redeemer, the nearer redeemer. “Hey bud, stop. Sit down here. Naomi has come back, and she has land to sell. You’re the first in line. You’ve got first right of refusal. If you want to buy it, buy it.”

We hold our breath and we wait. Don’t buy it. Don’t buy it. Let Boaz marry Ruth. Then we’re amazed. He says, “I will buy it.”

But Boaz is a master negotiator in verse 5. “Okay, buy it,” he says. “But also remember you’re going to have to take care of Naomi in her old age. You’re going to have to marry Ruth and raise up a grandson for Elimelech. The privilege entails a responsibility.”

His enthusiasm was stopped in its tracks. Right on the spot, in front of ten witnesses, Boaz executed the legal covenant to buy the land and take responsibility for Naomi and Ruth. Boaz

walked off with a smile on his face (as the expression goes) that even an undertaker couldn't get off.

It all started with darkness and death and despair and depression. Now it ends with joy and excitement. Boaz and Ruth were going to have a baby – a baby boy. And now the one who was empty is full again. The women of Bethlehem gather around Naomi and say, “Blessed be God who has provided a redeemer for you. The child will restore your life and will sustain you in old age. And Ruth – Ruth means more to you than seven sons.” Look at chapter 4, verse 15.

That's a culture that didn't value women very much. In this patriarchal culture the declaration is that Ruth, the daughter-in-law, was better than seven sons. And, indeed, she is, for she was the comfort of Naomi in all of her dark days. She had declared that Naomi's hurt would be her hurt. Naomi's sorrow would be her sorrow. She would go with her and be with her and stay with her and love her and care for her. “Nothing, save death itself, will separate us.”

Thank goodness Naomi had a daughter-in-law of faith, an Abraham-like character who left her homeland and proclaimed faith in God. The presence of God was with her even as those words were springing from her lips – that Naomi's God would be her God.

We have to be there for each other.

There is a children's book that has a scene with Piglet and Winnie the Pooh. They are in the forest, with a storm coming up. Can't you see Piglet's little tail now, beside the big honey bear. Their short conversation says it all.

**Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.**

**“Pooh,” he whispered.**

**“Yes, Piglet?”**

**“Nothing,” said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. “I just wanted to be sure of you.” (A. A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., p. 120)**

For some of you today, Naomi's story is your story. You were once full and now you're running on empty. Running on empty. You're reaching – reaching for that Ruth in your life who can love you just like you are. Reach out to this, your family. Reach out to them. Live together. Love each other. Weep with those who weep. Rejoice with those who rejoice.

We have to be sure of each other.

Oh yeah, the rest of the story. In Matthew 1, the genealogy of Jesus, the characters in branches of our Lord's family tree:

Matthew 1:5-6

Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rehab, Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David the king....

Ruth, running on empty, becomes the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king, David, whose throne is ultimately filled by the Christ, the real King.