

Series Ruth

This Message #2 The Return to Bethlehem

Scripture Ruth 1:3-22

The first five verses of the story provide important background information to help us understand the context of the story. Here is a brief summary of the beginning of the story:

During a time of famine, a man from Bethlehem in Judah took his wife and two sons outside the border of Israel into the land of Moab. Moab was a fertile area, but the people of Moab were pagan idolators and enemies of God's people, and, by going there, the family from Bethlehem was disobeying God. The family intended their stay in Moab to be for only a short period of time, but the brief time actually stretched into a number of years. The husband died there, the sons married Moabite women. Then the sons died, and the family unit was reduced to the three surviving widows, Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth.

The book is named after Ruth, but she does not have an important role in the story until chapters 2 and 3. The central character in chapter 1 is really Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law.

In the Ancient Near East, women without the protection of male family members were in a very difficult situation. Naomi, in particular, was in an especially desperate situation. She was an alien in a pagan land. She was without any means of support. And, because she had become the de facto head of the family unit, she was responsible for her two daughters-in-law.

For the first time in her life, Naomi was required to make her own decisions. As long as there had been men in her household, she was under their authority. Through the years her father, then her husband, later her sons, made the decisions because they were the family leaders. It was very rare for women to find themselves in the role of "head-of-family." After the deaths of her sons, Naomi had to choose for herself the next steps of her life. In the portion we will think about today, we will find out what Naomi and her daughters-in-law decided to do.

Read Ruth 1:3-22

When Naomi heard “that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them,” The report turned her thoughts back to the LORD and to her former home. The report stirred up long suppressed emotions within her and helped her to decide what to do. The return to Israel would be her escape from her increasingly difficult circumstances in Moab.

Ironically her situation in Moab had become similar to the conditions which had caused the family to move from Bethlehem a number of years previously. Back then, there had been no food in Judah, so the decision to seek resources in Moab seemed a good idea. However, after the deaths of her husband and two sons, Naomi no longer had any way to sustain herself. Once again she faced the prospect of starvation. This was why the report from Judah was so intriguing, and why the thought of returning to Bethlehem was so appealing.

There was an additional consideration that weighed on Naomi’s mind. Her presence in Moab limited the options of her daughters-in-law in getting on with their lives. In the Ancient Near Eastern cultures, loyalty to family was very strong. When Naomi’s sons married, their wives became members of Naomi’s extended family. When their husbands died, the allegiance of Orpah and Ruth to the family of their husbands did not end. The fact that Naomi had become the family matriarch was very unusual, but it did not change the bond which existed between her and her daughters-in-law. According to culture and tradition, the responsibility to care for the daughters-in-law was on Naomi, and, according to the culture and tradition, Orpah and Ruth were obligated to stick with Naomi in all circumstances.

Thus Orpah and Ruth, as well as Naomi, prepared to leave the place where they had been living. We can only imagine what preparations were required. Undoubtedly they had accumulated a lot of possessions during the years in Moab, including farming implements since they were in an agrarian culture. They had to sell, give away, or abandon everything since they could travel with only items that they could carry.

Apparently they had not traveled far on the road toward Judah when Naomi anticipated a parting of their ways. It was Naomi’s intention to release the daughters-in-law from their obligations to her. She encouraged them to “go back to their mother’s home;” that is, to once again place themselves under the authority of their natural families. There they would have provisions and safety, and where another marriage might possibly be arranged for them.

Naomi's parting wish was that the LORD would show kindness to them, as they had shown kindness to their husbands and to her. There are three words in verses 8 and 9 to which I call your attention. Whenever the title "LORD" is printed in small caps, it is the Hebrew word "Yahweh." This is the special name used by Israelites when referring to their covenant-keeping personal God. It is significant that Naomi used this title for God. For several years she had been identified with the many Israelites who had turned away from God and tried to live independently of God. Like them, she had become helpless and despairing. Naomi was once again thinking about Yahweh, and was appealing to Him for help. Scripture indicates that it is to those who call on Him and desire a restored relationship with Him that God shows His "kindness," which is the second word I want to explain.

The word "kindness" (*Hebrew "hesed"*) is translated into the English language in a variety of ways, such as "loving-kindness," "unfailing love," "faithfulness," "compassion," "mercy." The Hebrew word refers to the attitude of God toward His chosen people. When God extends His "kindness," "love," and "mercy" to people, it becomes the basis of His relationship with people. Apparently the dynamics in Naomi's family had been good, because she made reference to the "loving-kindness" displayed by the daughters-in-law.

Thirdly, the blessing pronounced by Naomi for her daughters-in-law is translated "rest" in our English language Bibles. This is a special Hebrew word (*menuha*) which has a much deeper meaning than physical comfort or freedom from worry and anxiety. In the Hebrew language the word combines the ideas of security and comfort, as well as refuge and asylum under the authority of a protector or guardian. In the Scriptures, a place of "rest" was where hopes could be realized and dreams would come to fruition. Naomi wanted Orpah and Ruth to find that kind of "rest" "in the home of another husband."

Naomi gave a goodbye kiss to her daughters-in-law, amid much weeping, expecting them to then head off in the direction of their homes. However Orpah and Ruth surprised Naomi by refusing to separate from her. "No," they said. "We will go back with you to your people." Their devotion was remarkable in view of what they would have to give up in order to remain with Naomi. By following her, they would be abandoning their natural families, their friends, homeland, their culture, their pagan gods, and, in all probability, their future prospects for remarriage.

In verses 11-13 Naomi attempted to explain the irrationality of their decision to remain with her. She, more than they, understood the difficulties they would face as Moabite widows in Israel. She was in no position to provide a comfortable home for them. She understood the prejudices and pride of her own people. She understood the hatred that Israelites had for Moabites because of past conflicts with them. She knew that the possibility of Moabite widows finding husbands and being able to find “rest” inside Israel was next to zero. Therefore she, with firmness, urged Orpah and Ruth to return to their homes.

Verses 11 through 13 assume our understanding of the Old Testament law of levirate marriage. The word “levirate” comes from the term for “brother-in-law.” This law is explained in Deuteronomy 25, “If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel” (*Deuteronomy 25:5-6*).

For the levirate law to be fulfilled for Orpah and Ruth, Naomi would have to have more sons. Naomi reminded them that this was an impossibility. Then she pointed out some additional conditions to prove that Orpah and Ruth should not place any hopes in her. She reminded them that she was too old to find a husband, and, even if she did find a husband and could give birth to sons, it would be asking too much for Orpah and Ruth to wait until the sons were grown and eligible to marry.

Naomi understood the very undesirable circumstances that her daughters-in-law were in. There was no hope for them if they accompanied her into Israel. There was no hope for them in regard to the levirate law. Naomi had concluded that the only hope for them was to seek as much happiness and security as they could in their own country. Naomi presented facts that were obvious, and she anticipated that each of her daughters-in-law would agree with her.

As depressing and hopeless and bitter as were the circumstances of Orpah and Ruth, Naomi was convinced that her situation was far worse. As she reflected on her own future, she realized that she had even less to look forward to than her daughters-in-law. Notice the reason given at the end of verse 13, “the LORD’s hand has gone out against me.” Naomi understood that she was not just a victim of unfortunate circumstances. The sovereign LORD had been using adverse circumstances to redirect her thinking and desires.

After Naomi finished her description of the hopeless situation they were in, the three women wept together, and Orpah took leave of her mother-in-law with a parting kiss. For her, the arguments of Naomi had been persuasive. She recognized that the future would be as Naomi had described it. To go on to Judah would mean for her a life of sadness, misery, and grief. By staying in Moab she had a very slender hope of future happiness. She was obviously reluctant to separate from Naomi, but in the end, she was obedient to Naomi's instructions and returned to what was familiar to her.

In contrast to Orpah, Ruth held on to Naomi and made no move to depart. As they watched the retreating figure of Orpah, Naomi once more urged Ruth to go back with her. Ruth, however, in spite of the logic of Naomi's description of reality, and in marked contrast to the decision of Orpah, made her decision known with the eloquent words of loyalty and devotion printed in verses 16 and 17.

Note the various expressions spoken by Ruth in her declaration of loyalty to Naomi: "Where you go I will go." "Where you stay I will stay." "Your people will be my people." "Your God will be my God." "Where you die I will die." "Where you are buried I will be buried."

Ruth declared her loyalty to Naomi, her willingness to be identified with Naomi's people, and, in the most surprising statement of all, submitted herself to Naomi's God. Ruth's knowledge of the LORD God of Israel could not have been very developed, but from that moment onward, she willingly accepted His authority over her life. The words of Ruth were a solemn vow of personal allegiance to both Naomi and the covenant-keeping God of Israel. And then she backed up her words with the kind of oath which was typical of the Ancient Near East (*see for examples I Samuel 3:17; 14:44; 20:13; II Kings 6:31*).

Naomi recognized the determination of Ruth and realized that further argument would be useless, and so they went on toward Bethlehem, a journey of four or five days. Nothing is told of events along the road, but their arrival in Bethlehem was the cause of commotion. We can't know if the commotion was from the joy of seeing Naomi again or the shock over her changed appearance, but the question in verse 19 suggests that the women of Bethlehem were shocked by the changed appearance of Naomi.

Naomi's response to the women of Bethlehem revealed her deep set pain and turmoil. She asked that her name be changed from Naomi, which means "pleasant," "delightful," and "lovely," to "Mara," which means "bitter," because the Almighty had made her life very bitter. It was a common practice in the Ancient Near East to change a name to reflect changed circumstances (*see as examples, Genesis 17:5, 15; 32:28; 35:18; 41:45. There are many other such examples in Scripture.*) Naomi's statement was not expressed in anger against God but, rather, an acknowledgement of His sovereignty in directing her life.

Naomi contrasted her former and current conditions. She had gone away full but come back empty. This was a description of her emotional state, her sense of well-being. She had gone away with a husband and sons, secure in their ability to take care of her needs. As a family, they had gone away in an attempt to preserve the things they valued most, but unfortunately, all the people and the things had been taken away from her, and she returned widowed, childless, and deprived of every resource she needed to continue on with her life. She no longer viewed herself as "pleasant," "delightful," and "lovely."

Naomi was beginning to understand about her relationship with the Almighty. She acknowledged that the LORD had "afflicted" (or "testified against") her and brought "misfortune" upon her. Like most Israelites, Naomi believed that God blessed those who were righteous and brought calamity on those who were sinful and guilty of unrighteous behavior. This belief was based on the promises and warnings given by God in the Law. Naomi thus explained herself as an example of those who were chastened and disciplined by God. She had been among those who had willfully turned their backs on God and had suffered the consequences, but the covenant-keeping, merciful, and loving LORD had brought her back to where she belonged.

We need to recognize that the LORD disciplines His people because He is loving and merciful. He must sometimes use adversity to get His people to refocus their attention on Him, and to get them to return to the place they belong, spiritually speaking. Discipline is unpleasant, but it has a good purpose. The sooner we recognize when we are out of place, the sooner God can help us recover. The rest of the story of Ruth is about how God brought restoration to Naomi.